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"YOU HAVE DONE ME GREAT HONOR, MR. HARTWELL" SAID SHE. "I DECLINE YOUR OFFER WITH MY MOST PROFOUND APPRECIATION OF IT."

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Mile High

A Novel

by

HENRY C. ROWLAND

Author of
"FILLING HIS OWN SHOES" "DUDS"
"THE PEDDLER" "THE MAGNET" ETC.

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Chapter I

NEARLY all the patients of the Agnes Memorial Sanatorium were out of doors when the latest addition to their happy, hopeful band came dropping down upon them from the blue. In the case of the new arrival the custom of procedure associated in one's thought with such institutions for the treatment of tuberculous cases was diametrically reversed. To the popular mind unacquainted with the present-day scientific treatment of what a previous generation saw fit to call the White Plague, the patient is generally supposed to go from the sanatorium to heaven. But this one came from heaven to the sanatorium, and he came thence with a suspicious spot in his left lung, eventually to leave it with a pair of robust ones which held no taint.

The patients, variously scattered about the grounds or seeking shelter in the ladies' or open-

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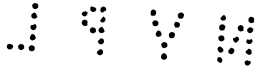
air pavilion from sun rays of such glittering intensity as to penetrate the tissues and cause the little T. B. rods to break up into shattered segments, watched the approach of the airplane with the mild interest of those following the flight of a homing carrier pigeon. There was an airdrome a few hundred yards away on the glittering plateau, a private enterprise for taking up sightseers to enjoy a panoramic view of Denver, the mile-high city at the front of the majestic Rocky Mountains toward which the Great Plains roll like a sea to the cliffs. Aircraft were often coming and going, passing over the imposing old Spanish-mission-style buildings of the sanatorium, with its terraces and arcades and façades gleaming like frosted silver. But now as they watched the homing flyer, a mile perhaps above their heads, instead of making for the hangar it began to circle the sanatorium, the center of its orbit, finally to take the ground lightly as one of the Chinese pheasants imported to the prairies, and running a little distance, as do these birds at landing.

Two men stepped out of the machine and pulled off their hoods. The pilot was short, dark, compactly made, with a jolly Irish face. His companion, a young man of thirty, stood six feet in height and had about him a good deal which suggested a viking, except that he was not distinctly blond. His hair shone in



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the sun like a chestnut fresh from the bur, with a sort of fine, lustrous nimbus. His eyes were a steely gray, nose short and straight, but with a sort of delicate expansion of nostrils as though they strove habitually for the intake of greater volumes of oxygen. His mouth was straight and too hard for so young a man, hard to the point of grimness, and a brilliant red spot burned in either of his lean, almost translucent, cheeks.

He stared at the sanatorium with a pleased expression, then drew out a platinum cigarette case with crest embossed in gold, a costly gift of an admiring friend, and marred, while yet enhanced, by a bullet hole drilled in one corner.

"Nice-looking place, Jimmy," said he; "might be a swagger country club or hacienda or a 'little gray home in the West' of a movie star."

"You betcna, Chris. It's top hole and a mile high, and one of the best towns in the United States about five miles away. If you like Montrose you'll be keen about Denver."

"Do you think they'll take me in? I understand they've got a big waiting list."

"Of course they'll take you in. The plant was built for your kind. You're an ex-soldier with a D. S. C. and a pair of gassed bellows that the T. B. have begun to nibble at one

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corner of, and you hail originally from Pittsburgh. When Doctor Holden, the director, hears your history he'll find you quarters if he has to build a new room on the roof or clear the trunk closet or something. Look at the girls walking round. Look at that range of mountains over there—Pike's Peak on one end and Long's Peak on the other. Did you ever see such a panorama?"

"Never did. Makes the Bernese Oberland from Interlaken look like a snow fort. I seem to breathe better here, too."

Jimmy began to unload the luggage, which consisted of two big valises, a pigskin kit bag, and a canvas sea bag which was stenciled, "Captain C. B. Carmichael." Several of the patients came walking over, two of them robust-looking young men whom one would never have suspected of the taint of tuberculosis.

"Are these birds patients?" Chris asked.

"Sure. You're not apt to be depressed much by the sight of your fellow sufferers. They don't take in the hopelessly crocked. The object of this ranch is to cure, not palliate. Bovine T. B. like yours is just their meat. Now let's leave the duffel here and go over and interview the chief."

Chris looked a little scared. "I like your nerve, Jimmy," said he. "Throw me into your dinky sky boat and sail me over here without

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so much as 'by your leave' or 'if you please' or 'go to hell' or anything."

"Well, that cough scared me, and you're no good to the company of which I have the honor to be general manager if you keep on as you are now. Montrose is too high for you, and so is Durango. And our jumps back and forth in this sky flivver are too risky. Last time your nose bled all the way. We want you, Chris, but we want you well; and I'll explain to Doctor Holden that we can't afford to lose so good an electrical engineer. You don't need any sweet-faced nurse to hold your hand—"

"The deuce I don't! What's the good of being crocked?"

"Well, then, you can do it out of business hours—only don't get yourself chucked out. Remember you're a guest here, so be a good boy and don't try to start anything."

They walked across the firm sward in sunlight so brilliant that it would have seemed to the lowlander as belonging to some other world—a sunlight that blazed down in fine vibrations and penetrated the tissues and set deep fibers tingling as though it would shine through one from its very intensity and come out the other side, leaving no shadow. Most of us have felt the rush of free air which seems to blow through our bodies as though they were porous, cleansing

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and refreshing them, and it was so with this sunlight, of which the effect was that of a translucent force not to be stopped by bodily opacity.

It was late in March, the ground frozen underfoot, with little sheathings of ice in its inequalities, and yet there was no sensation of chill in the faint breeze fanning from the snow mountains. It seemed to Chris that he was being sprayed by some volatile elixir which tingled the skin surfaces without chilling the deeper tissues. Here, he reflected, was just the contrary to the climate of France, where it was the chill wind which penetrated and the anæmic sunshine which appeared to stop on the outside. Even at the hospital in Switzerland, to which he had been sent after being gassed and wounded, there had been, as he had expressed it, no kick to the sunshine, while the cold air from the Alps had saturated his body like a sponge, and the *bise* set him shuddering from head to foot.

"My Lord! What a climate! What a country!" he said. "It would seem that a person that can't get well here had better hand in his resignation."

They passed round the steps of the administration building, where they were met by a friendly collie which seemed to have taken upon itself the duties of reception committee. At

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the same moment a big limousine car rolled up and stopped. Chris paused at the foot of the steps to glance back more in admiration of the size and make and burnished splendor of the vehicle than from any particular interest in its occupants. Then the chauffeur, who had the pointed, eager face, fresh color, and closely cropped blond mustache of an English noncom., leaped nimbly down to open the door, and as he did so the incandescent Colorado sun struck upon a flaming personality which seemed to fling back its rays with a sort of rejoicing reflection.

"Good Lord!" gasped Chris to Jimmy. "Is that a real girl—a Denver girl?"

"Must be," Jimmy answered. "Don't remember ever having seen one quite like that before, but the sun's strong to-day and maybe she's just shed her winter coat. Sometimes they blaze out at a fellow like that in the spring, especially chaps like us that have been snowed up in mining camps all winter. She does look like a million-dollar gold piece, doesn't she? Reminds me of that frosted ore in Mr. Welles's specimen case."

The comparison was apt. The girl who had got out of the car and stood for an instant surveying the entrance, as if looking for a porter or concierge or some other functionary, strongly suggested a fragment of the precious metals

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locked in such abundance in the safe-deposit vaults of the great range of snow mountains which formed her background. In that palpitating gust of solar intensity she looked far more than a pretty girl, like something intrinsically precious, richest ore crystallized in a globule of chalcedony; and there could be no question that aside from all ascetic value, cosmetic charm, hedonistic appraisal—whatever impossible words one tried to describe her in—she would, as she stood there, like a piece of glittering ore, have assayed a number of million dollars the ton. She was enveloped in a chinchilla coat that would have made almost any woman envious, and there was set on her lightly wound ruddy hair, which the sunlight was alloying with silver tints, a small round hat of some glistening plumage that looked as if it might be Inca feather work, the breasts of humming birds, perhaps, gorgeous and iridescent, and, like the coat, the involuntary sacrifice to beauty by hundreds of small victims. Her skirt was short, in pleasing accordance with the prevailing fashion, and the round fullness of the upper ankles slipped as through a funnel of bronze silk hosiery into bronze suède low shoes, short vamped and high of heel.

She turned her amber-colored eyes for an instant on the two young men, and their swift scrutiny held a look of amusement. The highly

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colored face was rich in natural tints, and the nose, high bridged but *retroussé*, seemed to tug up her full red lips in a tantalizing smile, as if she knew how she dazzled and glittered and was taking a wicked delight in it. Then she looked back into the limousine, where they caught a glimpse of a man's figure enveloped in a big white woolen overcoat such as polo players slip on when dismounting.

"Colorado!" gasped Chris. "Let's go get back in the sky boat. This place may be good for the lungs, but my heart would never stand the strain of it."

"Some girl!" breathed Jimmy. "Gold and oil could never do that. She must be in the movies."

"Then let's hope she leaves her package and goes back to the lot," said Chris. "If I look at her again they'll turn me down as too advanced a case."

The chauffeur, alert and cocky as a new-made corporal, now bent with military stiffness from the hips and assisted the cabin passenger to alight. As his face came into the glare Chris gripped Jimmy by the arm.

"Holy mackerel!" he breathed. "I know that bird! We were in training camp together and I saw him afterward in France. It's Jerry Heming."

The invalid got out a little feebly. He was a

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florid young man with yellow hair and a full, straight, cropped blond mustache. His face was rather pale and, like Chris, his sunken cheeks wore the brilliant red badge of the Order of Tuberculosii. It was plain that he had been of broad and powerful frame, and that he was at this moment hard bitten by the scourge, for his breath came in whistling gasps and there was a tense attenuation of his lips, which were slightly parted over his strong, white teeth. No less evident was the fact that he and the girl were brother and sister. There might have been no distinct likeness when the man enjoyed robust health. One could picture him as a florid and muscular or fleshy type, and his eyes were a pale blue, while hers were amber colored. But now, with features refined by his disease, the salient points of similarity became apparent, the planes and contours were identical, the high cheek bones, well-bridged noses, vertical line from chin to forehead, breadth between the eyes, and a proud, almost arrogant set to mouth, though the full lips of the girl had also a voluptuous expression and a hint of mirth at their corners.

"Jerry Heming," murmured Chris. "Wonder how he got his. When I saw him during the war he looked hard as nails. 'Fraid it wasn't the war fixed Jerry. More apt to have been the hell raising in Paris that followed the

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signing of the armistice. Guess I'll say *bon jour.*"

He went down a step or two just as an attendant came out. The girl flashed him a look of inquiry.

Chris pulled off his cloth hat in a casual way, then turned to Heming, who was supporting himself by a stick.

"Hello, Jerry!" said he. "Just reporting, old chap?"

Heming blinked at him for a moment through the dazzling glare; then his emaciated features were shot with recognition.

"Well, look who's here!" he exclaimed, in a voice which was cheerful, if hollow. "Old Chris Carmichael." He scanned Chris's face more closely. "You got it, too?"

"More or less," Chris answered, carelessly, "but that's the least of my cares. How long have you been hectic, Jerry?"

"Oh, they spotted it about six months ago. I'd been going off for several months, but put it down to a rush of wealth to the brain and burning daylight in Paris. Picked up a stray bug somewhere, and he got me under my guard and started a colony in both apices. I believe that's what the medicos call the first T. B. salient." He turned to the girl, who was surveying Chris with interest. "My sister grabbed me by the scruff of the neck and lugged me out

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here, and I'll tell the world Juanita is some lugger. Nita, this is my old pal, Chris Carmichael."

Juanita gave Chris a small, strong hand. "Surely you're not a patient here," said she.

"Not yet, but soon, I hope," Chris answered, cheerily. "It looks pretty good to me. Come down here, Jimmy, and get presented."

Jimmy came down bashfully. "My boss," Chris observed, after having made the introductions, "and the best ever. He grabbed me off the dump and threw me into his sky taxi out there, and hiked me over here to get cured. It isn't going to take us long, Jerry, with all this loose ozone and glorified daylight."

"Of course it won't," said Nita. "Jerry's trouble is about two thirds what the French call *le jazz*. He's got a spot in each lung, but this place will rub that out. Come along, old dear, let's go in and talk to the K. O. Jerry's all billeted. What do you mean by saying you hope to be a patient, Mr. Carmichael?"

"Well, you see, there's a big waiting list, and I'm not a very deserving patient."

Jimmy fastened Nita with his blue eyes, which were glittering and frosty like the ultramarine shadows in the big snow peaks piled up in the clear, dazzling distance.

"If I should need any help to get Chris

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wedged in here will you lend a hand, Miss Heming?" he asked.

Nita gave him her flashing smile. "Of course I will, Mr. Barclay," said she.

"Well, then," said Jimmy, "in that case I guess I might as well go over, wring the neck of my fan, and taxi up to the front door with the duffel."

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Chapter II

THE summer was on the wane. The great rolling seas of golden wheat had been safely garnered after the perils of wind and drought, the yellow corn stripped from the stalk, which was left standing in the littered fields, there to endure throughout the winter, with a curious resistance to rain and snow and icy gale, until plowed under the following spring.

The greatest of all gambles which is the prairie farmer's had been played to a successful finish with a bumper crop, though in some cases lack of hands to harvest it had resulted in unnecessary loss. Thousands and thousands of acres, to the eye poor and desolate, had yielded their generous contribution to a famine-stricken world. And, now that the harvest was in and shipped or stored for shipment, an air of abandonment even more forlorn than that which usually impresses the unaccustomed eye rested on the vast stretches of gray, tired soil, and the rolling thickets of ungainly cornstalks.

It was thus that this broad bosom of earth, the feeder of the world, at that moment impressed four people who were crawling across it

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insectlike in a big touring car of popular make. They were all Europeans, accustomed to the garden spots of art and beauty, though one of them knew something also of the dreary places, the Siberian steppes; and another had spent a part of his early life in the savage solitudes of the Australian bush and plains. The lives of the other two had been centered in the very heart of a finished civilization, where the beauties of art and nature had been so long combined as to become indistinguishable, and where the very atmosphere was charged with a sort of scintillating, vibrant, interweaving matrix of human passions and ambitions and tragedy and pleasure. These two, the man of early middle age and the girl of twenty-five, had been denizens of the capitals of Europe and its most lavish centers of gayety.

They were seeing the prairies for the first time, and in their most uninspiring aspects, for there were no crops, green or golden, to please the eye; few trees; as yet no distant mountains to break the monotony; no sheets of water, even, to reflect the dull glint of the leaden sky through an atmosphere that was murky and dead; no herds of cattle, hoofed or horned, to lend a note of animation; and the long, straight, dusty road drew a ragged line ahead as far as the eye could reach.

"Can you imagine anyone living here, Léon-

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tine?" asked the girl of her companion in the rear of the car, a very beautiful woman of about thirty-five. "I'd rather sweep crossings in a London fog."

"Well, my dear," Léontine answered, "we must look at it from an economic point of view. It is the country which furnishes most of us with our daily bread. Look over there, Patricia, about two miles away. That small dot is a man plowing. What do you suppose he thinks about as he crawls round that enormous field?"

The man driving the car looked round with a wry smile. He was broad of shoulder, with the high, handsome features of the well-bred Englishman, but his face was marred by a pair of eyes set rather too closely to the aristocratic high-bridged nose, and which, with a thin-lipped, cruel mouth, gave an expression of cold relentlessness.

"His thoughts and those of the horse are probably identical," said he.

"That's a mercy, Howard," Patricia answered. "But the women in those lonely farmhouses—what *they* think about? How can anything to make life worth living come into their existence?"

The other man turned with a shrug. He also was not without a certain claim to distinction of appearance so far as features were concerned.

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But this was marred by a sort of sinister irregularity; dark eyes, set not quite on the same horizontal plane, and his mustache and closely trimmed Vandyke, which grew thickly, failed to hide a mouth which was not precisely vulpine, but that of the cruel sensualist. His nose was rather large, one nostril more dilated than the other.

"If I had to choose between this and Cayenne or the Andamans I think I'd elect the latter," said he. "I wish we'd taken the train."

"In that case you might not have been given the choice, Stephan," said Léontine. "These Americans buzz over their country like flies over a kitchen table. I think we're taking a chance even to remain together. But this seems to be our only safe way out. The steamers are watched, and we are rather a conspicuous quartet. I must say, though, I'll be glad when we get out of this. We ought to make Denver tomorrow night if nothing happens to the car, and after that there are mountains and scenery and things."

"I must say this land of plenty is enough to give anybody the hump," said Howard Townley, who was driving listlessly, at a fair but normal speed. "Don't see quite what we're going to do when we reach Frisco without proper papers to get us to Japan."

"We'll cross that bridge when we come to it,

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mon ami," Stephan answered. "Anything now to get out of here. Looks as if it were going to rain or blow or something. I don't like that yellow smudge ahead."

His apprehensions were not unjustified, for, as if in resentment to this foreign railing against a vast tract which was lending generously of its resource to feed the countries of the four, an ominous change of weather descended upon them with a spiteful rancor. The dust-laden air became opaque, the wind rose quickly, and in an incredibly short space of time they found themselves boring into a dust storm which, a little earlier in the season, might have brought devastation to the immediate region. The gale thrummed through the telegraph wires so that the poles, as they passed, gave forth a steady sonorous diapason. The cornstalks on either side of the road began to sway stubbornly, and as the gale increased the wind seemed to lift the fine, impalpable dust, not unmixed with sand, from the surface of the earth and convert it into a suffocating cloud which weighed upon them like a woolen blanket, though worse by reason of its penetrating quality. Thicker and thicker it grew, sifting through the motor veils of the women. Stephan, who suffered slightly from asthma, began to breathe heavily in gasps. Howard Townley, his pale eyes red rimmed and his close-cropped mustache a saffron yellow,

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cursed under his breath, and gave the car a little more gas.

They came on a small way station with oil and water tanks and grain elevator and coal yard, and beyond these a few flimsy jerry-built houses and a general store.

"Want to stop?" he asked.

Léontine examined her road map. "No, keep on if you've gas enough," said she; "it's about eighteen miles to the next place. Imagine doing this sort of thing for fun. Yet lots of people do."

"They can have it," said Patricia. "Sometimes I'm almost tempted to turn honest. This life of crime is not all romance by a long shot."

"Nor profit, either," growled Townley. "Wouldn't I be a nice haul for some Secret Service sleuth—badly wanted in Paris for murder in the first degree?" His white, even teeth came together with a snap between his parched and dusty lips. "And everything coming right my way. If ever I cut the trail of that copper-headed beauty, there 'll be something in store for her!"

"You've a lot to learn, *mon ami*," said Léontine; "and one of the first and most important lessons is that in our precarious calling revenge, as such, does not pay. It cost Chu-Chu his life, and I could name a list of others that came to grief from trying to indulge it. This is getting

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worse and worse. I think we'd better stop the night in the next town. The book indicates a decent hotel."

There was no dissenting voice to this proposal. The local farmer, in his flivver, would have ridden through the dust storm unconcerned. But to these people there was something horrible about it, as if the country they had been abusing was determined to gather them up and smother them. The few knowing their true identity would have found it a pity that this could not be managed, as they were unquestionably, for all their elegance and high-bred traits, the four most ruthless, most desperate, most clever criminals whose joint forces were arrayed against society.

So they drilled on doggedly through the yellow shroud, now swept directly in their faces by a wind of high velocity. It was not such a dust storm as those who have never seen the sort might naturally imagine. For the yellow powder came less in puffs and swirls of thick opacity than as a sort of impalpable quality of the atmosphere itself, which seemed less to hold it in suspension than in saturation. It was homogeneous and constant, of a quality to sift through the closed ventilators and double windows of a Pullman car. Not the bitter alkali dust, but plain, finely powdered soil, and driven with such force that right after planting time

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the wheat grains might have been carried with it to ruin a splendid potential crop. It was one of the many evils with which those greatest of all gamblers, the farmers, had to cope.

Howard Townley stood it the best and kept up a sort of sardonic commentary. "Who wouldn't sell a farm and go to sea?" said he. "We'd all better send ourselves to the dry cleaners to-night or get the chambermaid to run her vacuum machine over us. Here comes a train. Lucky devils. I agree with Patricia. If I could only manage to grab off a Western heiress I believe I'd tread the straight and narrow path."

Léontine leaned forward. "Your path might be narrow, my lad," said she, "but never straight. Outlaws like ourselves are born, not made. We are put into the world, perhaps, for a definite purpose; a sort of counterirritant for a smug and satisfied society. Now let's speed up a little before we get asphyxiated."

Townley acted on this suggestion, not pettishly, but with disastrous results. The straight but straggling road was fairly good if one watched it carefully and avoided occasional deep holes, ground out by the big freighting vehicles. But the dust had got into Townley's eyes, and as he forged more rapidly ahead they plunged into one of these with a jounce which, heavy laden as they were with luggage, brought the

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body of the car down against the chassis with a thump. Then as it sprang up again there came suddenly from its vitals an agonizing, tearing, smashing sound, as though the whole mechanism was being rent and torn. The car stopped abruptly, and they sat for a moment in silent dismay while the yellow dust-wind sighed past dolefully and the telegraph wires sang like the Æolian harps.

Townley was the first to recover himself. "That," said he, "sounds as if we'd ripped away the whole lining of this music box."

The others were too dismayed for words. As experienced motorists they realized that there could be no such devastating and destructive sounds as these without serious damage to the mechanism. Townley slipped out from under the steering wheel and leaped to the road.

"You might as well all get down and stretch your legs," said he. "That racket came from the transmission box, and merely plumping into a hole is not enough to account for it. I haven't touched the gear lever and it's solid in its notch. Sounds as if some Bolshevik had thrown a monkey wrench in the gears."

The others had been in rather strained positions for some time, wedged in with their hand luggage, and made no objection to the straightening of cramped limbs. Léontine and Patricia wound their veils a little more snugly about

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their heads, and stepped out. Stephan shrugged and lighted a cigarette while Townley proceeded to investigate the damage. He lifted the cover of the box, and, rolling up his sleeve, felt about for a moment in the mixture of fluid grease, then fished out a broken pair of pliers. Holding these, with the blackened oil dripping from them, he looked for a moment grimly at the others, then turned to examine the cogs.

"Mangled all to pieces," said he. "Not only stripped, but forced out of union. Straight case of sabotage back on the road. Possibly last night or perhaps a night or two before. Some late enemy took exception to our distinguished French and English personalities and decided to let us down. That accursed thing would lie in the bottom of the box without doing any damage until we got a good jolt, when it would be thrown up and jam in the transmission. This bump in that hole did the trick. So here we are about twenty miles from nowhere, in the middle of the afternoon, with a sand storm blowing and a cold, dead car."

"Can we manage to limp into the next town?" Léontine asked.

"No, my dear lady. The cogs would only hit in spots and strip the few remaining ones, even if they engaged, which they don't. We've got to get a whole new box, and where to find it Heaven knows."

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"Then what are we to do?" Stephan asked.

Townley shrugged. "That's a bit of a conundrum," said he. "We don't want to lose the car, and it's too far to walk, anyhow. We've got to wait here until somebody comes along that's willing and able to give us a tow."

Patricia unwound her veil and tried to stare through the grayish-yellow opacity which was almost like a mist. No human habitation was in sight, but the range of visibility extended not more than a quarter of a mile. Léontine also unswathed her face.

"Howard's the skipper," said she, calmly. "I suppose there's nothing to do but sit on the stile and continue to smile. It was all my fault. I shouldn't have advised trying to hurry."

Adventurers as they were, though criminal ones, they accepted the catastrophe with stoical philosophy.

"Get out the tea basket, Stephan," said Léontine. "We might regale ourselves with a little tea and biscuits and dirt."

Stephan complied with a grimace. Patricia surveyed the others with a curious smile which whipped up one corner of her wide mouth, while there was a lifting of her beautifully arched left eyebrow. Her face, which was of a strange elfin beauty, showed no particular concern at their dilemma. Then as they were munching the biscuits, which gritted between their teeth, and

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sipping the cold tea, she sprang up suddenly from her seat on the tool box.

"Somebody's coming!" she announced.

Her acute senses were correct. The gusts of wind brought down the hum of a motor, and a moment later there loomed from the murk a powerful open touring car with a single occupant. It was coming fast, but on discovering them the driver turned off to the side of the ill-defined road, and came to a stop.

"In trouble, folks?" said a pleasing, resonant voice.

"Worse than that," Townley answered. "We are scrapped. The inside of this wagon is a mangled mass."

The newcomer stepped down to the road, and they saw him to be a man of about forty, of medium height, but very broad, with a powerful frame and a square face, the lower half of which seemed to hold a certain grimness in its strength of jaw and the firm, straight line of his mouth. He wore a large, soft hat, from under the rim of which a pair of intent and very dark-blue eyes shone at them from under straight, black, heavy eyebrows.

"What's the damage?" he asked.

Townley explained what had happened. The newcomer slipped off his coat and rolled the sleeve of his flannel shirt back over a forearm of which the big muscles bulged like those of a

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Vulcan. He made a brief examination, then turned to them with a nod, wiping off the dripping lubricant with a handful of waste. As he did so he appeared suddenly to be caught by some expression in Patricia's face; or perhaps it was the peculiar quality of beauty in the face itself. Speech and action seemed temporarily checked in him, as if he had received a sort of shock, and he stared at the girl with a look of wonder and disbelief.

But this was only for a second and passed unnoticed. The eyes of both women were fastened on the big silver star pinned to his broad chest and bearing the inscription "Sheriff." Though they had nothing to fear from the sheriff of a county in eastern Colorado, the mere fact of his representing the law inspired in their criminal natures the same emotions which a plain's wolf crouched in the sagebrush might feel at sight of a passing dog. Then Townley handed the sheriff a pair of broken pliers.

"That's what did for us," said he. "Some blighter in a garage took a dislike to us, no doubt, because we're French and English."

"I thought we were through with that stuff," said the sheriff, "but I guess you're right. The skunk counted on your getting some distance off before striking a bit of bad road to mess things up. Well, folks, it ain't so bad as it might be. My place is only about three miles

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from here, straight out across the prairie, on that trail you passed a few hundred yards back. I reckon there's only one thing for you to do. I can take you in tow and put you up for a couple of days until we can get a new box shipped from Denver."

"But that's asking far too much of you," Léontine persisted.

"Don't you believe it, ma'am," the sheriff answered. And again his burning eyes fastened with a sort of eagerness on Patricia's face. "I'm a bachelor and I'd be mighty glad of a little pleasant company. My house is the best in these parts, if I do say it myself. I can make you a lot more comfortable than you could be in a hotel, and it's getting late."

"It's awfully good of you," murmured Patricia, who had not missed the effect she had produced on this stalwart Samaritan resolving out of the dust haze.

"Not a bit of it, ma'am." He seemed unable to take his eyes from her face. "Visitors like you-all, that care enough for this country of ours to ride out across it, have got to be looked after a little. I'll send one of my hands right off to telegraph for a new box, and we ought to get it day after to-morrow, this being one of the big brands of car. I've got something of a machine shop and it won't take long to start her going again."

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"Well, I must say," said Townley, "it's no end good of you. The main thing now is to get the ladies in out of this dust storm."

"That's what, sir. She's sure rough on those not used to it. I could tow you on to town, but it would be a long, slow haul, and besides, the ladies will be a lot more comfortable at my place. My name's Hartwell, and I own most of the country hereabouts. Let's go."

Stephan, always polished, made a brief introduction—Léontine, as his sister, the Countess de Vaux; Patricia, as her niece, Miss Melton; Howard, as Sir Harold Trimble; and himself, the Comte de Vallignac. The sheriff's blazing blue eyes glowed as he acknowledged this distinguished acquaintanceship, but he did not appear to be in any way abashed. Stepping to his own big car, the back of which was filled with stores and various supplies, he procured a piece of rope and attached the crippled vehicle, and as he worked he glanced from time to time at Patricia as if under the spell of some irresistible fascination. They took their places and, the trail being wide, turned with no difficulty and moved off at a fair rate of speed through the enshrouding murk.

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Chapter III

HIS six months' sojourn at the sanatorium had, so far as clinical symptoms could discover, effected a cure in the case of Chris, but Doctor Holden advised his staying on to clinch the nail of recovery.

Heming's process was still active, though his general condition showed infinite improvement. Most encouraging symptoms were his gain in weight and appetite and his absence of night sweats, while the hacking cough and hæmoptysis had disappeared.

To be near her brother, Nita had taken one of the small bungalows of the newly married colony on the plateau, where she lived simply but most comfortably, attended by three servants—an elderly maid, a French butler, and his wife, the cook, which pair she had brought with her from France. As soon as Jerry was allowed she came frequently to take him and Chris and often a pair of fellow patients for drives about the region, these, short at first but longer as permission was accorded, the sanatorium being by no means the mere country club which it resembled.

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Chris, of course, had fallen hopelessly in love with her immediately, but kept it sternly to himself. For one thing, there was the taint of his disease, about the absolute cure of which he felt he could not feel sure for many months and after testing in a trying climate. For another obstacle, as he saw it, Nita and her brother were very rich. Chris learned that Jerry had been left a new oil field by a man of his company who had been killed in France, and that he had given his sister, outright, a half interest in this.

It was not until Chris had become very well acquainted with Nita that she told him the circumstances of this inheritance, and then it came about by accident. He was riding with her alone one day through Denver when, on slowing at a crossing, Nita leaned suddenly forward with a gasp and stared for a moment at a tall, broad-shouldered, youngish man, who was waiting for the car to pass. She fell back against the seat, and Chris, glancing at her, saw that her face was ghastly, while there was a lurid light in her amber-colored eyes.

"Good Lord, Nita!" said he. "Have you seen a ghost?"

She looked at him with the flicker of a smile.

"I thought for a moment it was rather worse than that, Chris."

"What do you mean?"

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"Well, a man who would make a ghost of me if he ever got the chance."

"Good Lord! Tell me who he is, and quick."

"His name is Howard Townley, but he would scarcely be using it now. His outward and visible signs, build, face, speech, and manners, are those of a well-born Englishman, and the inside of him is pure unadulterated devil. Jerry has told you how he was left a fourth interest in a piece of an apparently good-for-nothing Oklahoma ranch which proved to be the lid of a honeycomb of oil. One of the other legatees was a girl who had been doing Salvation Army work in the war. This man Townley learned the facts of the case and got himself engaged to her, and then deliberately murdered this boy who had made her one of his heirs when on the firing line. He stabbed him in a drunken sleep. Jerry was suspected. I got to work on the case and laid a trap for Townley, and proved him to be the murderer, but he got away and no trace has been found of him since. He tried to kill me when the trap was sprung, but missed it. This was in Paris. One thing is perfectly sure, and that is, if he ever gets a chance he will certainly do me in."

Chris listened to this astonishing statement with a face which hardened as Nita described the affair more in detail. From time to time he glanced at her with a sort of wonder. It

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seemed incredible to him that this soft and tender lady, who had impressed him, for all of her vivid personality, as a last cry in a girl *de luxe*, could have passed through such a terrific adventure. Nita noticed his expression and laughed.

"You see, I'm not entirely the downy-winged butterfly you take me for, Chris. Before Jerry came into this fortune and quadrupled it by subsequent operations I was living pretty much by my wits. During the war I was in London most of the time and attached to the Secret Service as a sort of parlor spy. Just now I am trying to forget all that, but sometimes when I catch sight of a man who looks like Townley I feel the prick of the sword of Damocles. The man is by no means the ordinary adventurer. He is absolutely ruthless, and I think that in such a diabolic nature as his revenge would be a primary consideration. He was struck not only in his avarice, but in his pride and passion and self-respect. He thought that he had made a conquest of me. So far no man has ever done that; and perhaps it is better not, as there's no telling what day I may have to pay the price."

Chris had turned a little paler, and Nita, now glancing at him, felt that the revelation was not entirely on her side. Up to this time she had found him a light-hearted, happy-go-lucky pal, who never seemed to take life seriously and re-

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minded her of a big, irresponsible, rather mischievous boy. They laughed a good deal when together, avoiding flirtation as if by mutual consent, yet growing daily nearer in sympathy.

But Chris's face at this moment was anything but boyish. It wore the grimness of battlefields and his gray eyes gleamed at her with a sort of hungry, yearning look. "Lord!" he muttered. "I wish it were my right to be your bodyguard. You really ought to have one, you know."

"That's what Jerry says. But I don't think it would help much. I've got to depend on my sixth sense and ability to see him first if ever he crops up."

They drove on for some distance in silence; then Chris asked: "Have you taken any steps for your self-protection?"

"Only my five senses—and this." Nita drew from her pocket a small automatic. "I have practiced and practiced and practiced till I can drive nails with this toy."

Chris shook his head. "That's not enough, Nita. Now listen, and don't think me a presumptuous ass. I've loved you nearly to death from the moment I laid eyes on you. That's no great distinction, of course, as a lot of better men must have done the same. But if my cure should prove a certainty don't you think that you might take me on, as a constant protector,

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if nothing else? It's too awful to think of this danger hanging over you, and scarcely any line of defense."

Nita patted the back of his hand. "I think you are a dear, Chris," said she, "and it wouldn't be very hard to grow intensely fond of you, but I'm not quite ready for a husband just yet."

"I don't blame you, Nita. Somehow I can't quite see any mere man annexing you, though there are plenty of real ones out in this country. But your capture ought to be achieved by some sort of an Olympian or Martian or superman—a he creature as glorious as yourself and one hundred per cent clean in soul and body."

Nita laughed and gave him an indulgent look that was not without a tinge of affection.

"I don't think you're so terribly far from that standard yourself, Chris. I've always had the faculty of weighing men and it has been backed by a lot of personal experience. Doctor Holden says he will stake his professional reputation on your complete cure—and there are certainly no spots in your soul."

"Thanks, Nita. I've tried to keep straight for just such a girl as you, and I must say I don't feel much like a lunger. But all the same it wouldn't be a fair exchange. I'm just a poor engineer and you're a sort of Miss Crœsus."

"That part of it is all rubbish. Jerry's com-

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pany has brought in fifteen wells in the last eighteen months, and if I were to wait until I found a Prince Charming with all the graces and a fortune anywhere approaching mine, I'd be pretty apt to die an old maid. The trouble is, Chris dear, I'm not yet quite sure of myself. I was pretty hard hit, but in the heart instead of the lungs, and I've got to be certain that the wound is healed before I offer that afflicted organ in exchange for a perfectly sound one."

"Who was the fool man?" Chris asked. "Or did he happen to be already married?"

"No, he wasn't married when I met him, but he was in love, and married shortly after. His name is Calvert Steele, and he was one of Jerry's coheirs and he married a very beautiful girl named Isabel Orme."

"Of course. Grenfell Orme's daughter. They sent me cards. I've heard of Steele. But you don't propose to die an old maid on that account, do you?"

"Oh no; but I don't intend to get married until thoroughly cured. It wouldn't be quite fair to the man to start him under a handicap. That's one reason I brought Jerry way out here instead of taking him to Switzerland. There are others, of course. This is better air and his native atmosphere, and there was always the possibility of Townley's skulking about Paris. The police thought it probable that he had re-

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lations with the remnants of an old criminal crowd, and that they were hiding him in some corner."

Chris reflected for a moment. "At any rate, you ought to have some sort of bodyguard, Nita. With your great wealth you could afford a constant watch of Secret Service men, disguised as some sort of supernumerary employees."

"I don't like the idea, Chris, and they'd get on my nerves. I'm depending on my bright eyes and other acute senses. Besides, I've no reason to think he's in America."

Chris sighed. "It's pretty awful for me," said he. "Here I am about ready for my discharge from the sanatorium and hopelessly in love with you, and not qualified to urge you to marry me because of a lung I'm not yet sure of and a salary that would about pay your shoe bill—"

"You must be earning good money, Chris. But do you really think that money matters? It is not much of a compliment to a woman, as I see it, to be quite willing to take her but balk at her money. It places the money as something of greater worth than the woman."

Chris brightened a little. "I hadn't thought of that," said he.

"Besides," Nita went on, "I'm not entirely selfish, Chris. Jerry and I are not letting our incomes get ahead of us, and since we can't

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begin to spend it all we are feeding a good many hungry people. If I were to fall in love with you I don't think I'd let the money stand in the way. But you see I was built a one-man woman and I got the idea in my silly head that I'd met the one man. It's probably not true, though, because I really don't believe we would have got on."

"Why not?"

"He'd never have approved of me. I've always been foot loose and can't bear restraint. Sooner or later we'd have clashed. I haven't much patience with conventionality."

"Well," said Chris, "I tell you what I'm going to do; I'm going to chuck my job with the electric company and find one here in Denver, where I can stick round and keep my eye on you. I'll tell Jimmy Barclay that the altitudes of Montrose and Durango are too high for me to tackle right away."

"But I don't want you to chuck a good job on my account, Chris."

"There isn't anything I wouldn't chuck for you, Nita, and as long as there's a fighting chance I'm going to stick round."

He took her hand and raised it to his lips. "Here's where I swear fealty. You can do with me what you like, or not do what I'd like, but I'm yours even if the day never comes when you shall be mine."

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Nita turned her head slowly, and her amber eyes looked deep into his gray ones. Chris's face was pale, but there were no hectic spots. He looked precisely what he was—a strong, honest, and unaffected young man, hopelessly in love. And now, as Nita examined him closely, certain little tendrils which had long been dormant, like roots in frozen soil, began to stir and quiver again. Like many highly vitalized and purposeful women of intense nature, her mind had never been seduced by her own beauty or the admiration it created. She was incapable of falling in love with herself or with love, and with her this passion could have but a single objective. This had seemed long in coming. Once or twice she had thought it near, but had been deceived. Looking now at Chris, she wondered if it might not have come at last. Five years before it would have been the case, but a beautiful woman who has led a life as intense as hers goes through a series of inoculations which make her each day more resistant to amorous infection.

So now she sighed, and said: "You're a dear, Chris, but I don't think I could merely fall in love with anybody. There would have to be some sort of crisis—an upheaval, some sort of tremendous adventure that would rouse me out of this fat lethargy I am falling into since I haven't had to forage for my living. I should

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need an emotional melting pot. Do you understand, my dear, or do you think I'm merely balmy?"

"I understand, Nita," said Chris, quietly. "I felt that way myself for some time after the war. We've all been living at such high tension that it's pretty impossible to start anything without some high explosive—like a log jam."

"We'd better not try until the time comes," said Nita, "but somehow I have a hunch that that's not so terribly far off. Sometimes it seems to me when I've waked in the night that there was some fearful influence at work not far away. I don't think it's nerves, because I'm too healthy, and it's not cowardice, because I'm no coward. There's nothing psychic about me, either, but I do believe that when people are thinking intensely of each other, whether it be love or hatred, it sets in motion some force that draws them together. Let's wait and see what happens, Chris."

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Chapter IV

AS the two cars moved away through the rush of dust-laden wind, Léontine gave a low laugh.

"Fancy our being rescued by the sheriff of the county," said she. "I wonder what he'd do if he knew whom he had in tow."

"Precisely the same thing, I imagine," Patricia answered. "He'd treat us as honored guests till the time came to lock us up."

"I say," Sir Harold turned in his seat. "It gave me a bit of a jolt the way he kept those searchlights of his fastened on Patricia. I fancy it was sheer infatuation—couldn't seem to take his eyes off her long enough to get his bally rope."

Stephan nodded. "A case of love at first sight," said he. "But then, our little Patricia has that effect on a good many—and much good it does them."

"That sheriff," said Patricia, "is very much of a man. If ever I were to lose my mind and surrender to a man, it would be to some one like that. He reminds me"—a wave of color passed across her face—"of Clamp, the peddler."

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"But he is so crude—a common man—a man of the soil," Stephan protested.

"I don't object to that," Patricia answered, "but I do object to the soil. This is the most terrible place I was ever in." She coughed a little and rubbed her eyes. "Can you imagine any person of intelligence staying here who might earn a living in any other place?"

Sir Harold shrugged. "One can get used to anything," he said, "but this is pretty bad, I must admit, and the worst of it is you can't even get a peg to wash down the dust."

"They are crazy, these Americans," growled Stephan. "One cannot go in a bar and get a glass of light beer or pure wine, but one can go into a pharmacy and buy a bottle of nasty stuff full of drugs which one does not need, with twenty-five degrees of alcohol. My digestion will be ruined before I get out of this accursed country."

"Where the devil is the fool taking us?" growled Sir Harold, for the car ahead had turned suddenly at right angles and they began to make their way along a narrow trail which led off from the railroad into the oblivion of the dust-shrouded prairie.

"Don't be ungrateful," reproved Léontine; "and let me tell you that this sheriff is anything but a fool. Remember the fatal mistake you made in finding Clamp a fool. There is some-

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thing about this man which puzzles me. But one thing is certain—he has fallen a victim to Patricia. I never saw such a devouring stare."

"That's apt to be the way with a full-powered chap who lives alone," Sir Harold answered. "You'd better mind your eye, Patricia."

The trail led on for a mile or two between barbed-wire fences. They passed presently a small herd of rough-coated, wild-eyed cattle, lying back to wind, with a yearling bull standing sullenly, as if on picket duty. It gave a grunt and shook its horns at them as they passed, and began to paw the dust, rumbling in its throat. A little later the ranch buildings bulked up ahead, treeless, unsheltered from sun or wind, with the windmill standing like a skeleton, and the corral, in which a dozen horses stood with drooping heads and their backs to the wind.

But as they drew near it was plain that the place was not without a certain air of prosperity. The buildings were in good repair and freshly painted. The house was large and stanch, with windows neatly screened, and had a porch with solid columns, almost a veranda.

The sheriff drew up in front of this and stopped, then leaped down and came to the side of their car.

"Well, here we are, folks," said he, cheerfully. "Not much of a place for people like yourselves, but any port in a storm—especially

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a dust storm." He opened the door and helped out Léontine and Patricia. "Come right in," said he, hospitably. "My Chinaman will get your duffel."

They entered the house and glanced about with pleased surprise. The floors were of hard wood, spread with heavy Navajo blankets and skins of antelope and elk and wolves. At the right was what appeared to be an office, and at the left a big living room, twenty by thirty feet, with heavy Mission furniture and a big center table with a large reading lamp and sheaves of current magazines. One entire side of the wall had bookshelves built in to a height of five feet, and these were filled with volumes, many in sets, but the top two rows contained apparently only works of fiction and descriptive travel. On the other side was a big brick fireplace, with a mirror over the mantel. There were a number of mounted heads, wapiti and mountain goats and big-horned sheep and deer and antelope, and in a corner by a window was a writing desk, and on the other side of the chimney a broad divan covered with a gayly hued Indian blanket. At the end of the room double doors opened into a dining room, where there was a table and sideboard of Colonial period with chairs to match. The guests, ushered into the big hall, looked about them with considerable surprise.

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"Upon my word, Mr. Hartwell," said Sir Harold, "this looks like a shooting box in the old country."

The sheriff smiled. "I copied it after a hunting lodge owned by a little club several hundred miles upstate," said he. "I guided for them a good many years ago before I came down here and started in dry farming. Now, if the ladies will follow me, I'll show them their quarters. Wonder where that Chink of mine has got to."

The Chinaman came bustling in at this moment, smiling, suave and unsurprised, like all his race. He rubbed his palms together and ducked his head. "How do! How do!" said he. "Velly nice day."

"Velly nice day indoors," said the sheriff, with a grin. "Make up the two spare rooms, Charley, and get that jar of cold cream; then make plenty hot water." He turned to Léontine. "Don't try to wash off the dirt with water, ladies," said he. "Use the cold cream first and when you've got the top layers off you can take soap and water for what's left." And again his sparkling blue eyes fastened on Patricia, who had slipped off her motor coat, to reveal long supple curves and a physique that left one in doubt as to whether it was full or slender and willowy.

He led them then through the office, which was fitted in businesslike style with a big safe

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in one corner, a roll-top desk, letter files, and a sort of showcase in which were specimens of wheat and oats and corn and dried alfalfa. There were also some large, framed photographs of horses and cattle and hogs, these decorated with a blue ribbon; and on one side of the room was an etching of Lincoln, and underneath a long, panoramic view of the Rockies. Going through this office, they entered a wing which contained two comfortable bedrooms, furnished in simple modern style, each with two white-enameled beds, and a bath at the far end.

"I'll put you ladies in this first one," said the sheriff, "and the count and Sir Harold can have the other."

"But your house is really wonderful," said Léontine. "Dry farming must be very profitable for you to live in such luxury."

"Well, there ought to be some compensation," said the sheriff. "I've made out pretty well, and this year I had about a thousand acres under cultivation, with considerable more in range. Make yourselves at home. Charley will look after you. He knows the ropes, as I have visitors right often."

A big Danish farm hand presently brought in their luggage, and his boyish face lightened with pleasure when Léontine addressed him in his own tongue, for, like most Russians, she spoke fluently many European languages.

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As they were getting themselves clean Léontine said to Patricia: "I was right about the sheriff. He's not a common man. I suppose that he makes thousands and thousands out of this place."

"Millions wouldn't keep me here," Patricia answered. "I can't tell you just what it does to me, Léontine. I've never dreaded prison much, for the simple reason that they shall never land me there alive. But how can any human being live in such a lonely place as this?"

"I must say," said Léontine, "that it wouldn't take much of it to finish me. Perhaps he will not stop on after you go. You've thrown a sort of spell on him, my dear."

They finished their toilet presently and went back, to find the sheriff chatting with the two men. He clapped his hands, and Charley appeared, carrying a big tray with tea, and that last of beverages which one might have expected to find in the home of an American constable—a decanter of whisky. The eyes of Stephan and Sir Harold rested on this gloatingly.

"My word!" said Sir Harold. "I'm glad the old tank broke down."

The sheriff gave his pleasing, resonant laugh. "We all don't practice what they preach to us from Washington," said he. "I've got several barrels in a burglar-proof safe deposit. Don't

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use it much myself, but there are times. Will you serve the tea, countess?"

He had changed into a well-fitting blue serge suit and stood with his back to the chimney, a striking personality, broad of shoulder, small of waist, but massive of physique, and his grim face had relaxed and wore an expression of boyish pleasure which softened its deep-cut lines and gave to it a sort of eternal youth, despite the grizzled curly hair and weather-beaten skin. There was about him no air of uncouthness, but rather a sort of rugged, virile manhood and soldierly bearing.

"You must be a great reader," said Stephan, who had been examining the bookshelves. "But here are some Spanish volumes—Ibanez." He took out a handsomely bound book in the original text. "Do you know Spanish?"

"Yes," answered the sheriff. "I've got a fair working knowledge of it. You see, I never counted on spending the whole of my life here. To tell the truth, I sort of figured on cleaning up and selling out and starting in to travel when I'd turned forty-five. But something's happened now that may keep me on the job a few years longer. Wait, I'll show you."

He stepped into the office, to reappear a moment later carrying a salt bag half full of some small heavy objects. These he emptied carelessly upon the center table, where they

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lay, a heap of grayish-green pebbles of diamond shape, rather dull and uninteresting to the casual eye. But as Sir Harold glanced at them he drew his breath quickly, though noiselessly, and such an expression came into his face as might be worn by a thief at the sight of unprotected treasure, which was, in fact, precisely the case.

"Lord!" he gasped. "Where did you get those? Or perhaps I shouldn't ask."

The sheriff laughed. "Oh, it's no secret," said he. "You recognize 'em, then?"

"Well, rather. I've been up to Kimberley."

"Well, sir, these have been pronounced by experts quite up to the Kimberley water, though they run small. The trouble is it costs the value of six diamonds to get five. But I aim to correct that. I've got a scheme that ought to fetch easy millions with maybe half that spent. These come from the edge of a butte on my property not five miles from here. Well, sir, since you know something of diamonds, what would you value these at, roughly?"

Sir Harold picked up several of the stones and examined them critically.

"If they run fairly flawless and of good water I should say about two hundred thousand."

"Well, that's close to my estimate. You see they'd cut down pretty small. But there's no lack of them there. Digging and sifting is slow

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business. But with hydraulic power I figure we could more than compensate for the difference between American and Kafir labor. I've been offered a cold million for the little patch of dirt these come from."

His brilliant blue eyes turned to Patricia with a curious, questioning expression, as if he were wondering whether this statement would be of any special interest to her. They were met by a baffling look, cool, impenetrable, absolutely negative so far as it revealed the slightest trace of the personal interest he sought. But the left eyebrow raised slightly at the outer corner and her wide mouth, with its thin, carmine lips, whipped up into a smile, drawing them back against the double row of white, even teeth, which seemed to the plainsman almost too perfect to be real. They were very strong teeth, set straight across until they came to the canines, and there was about their arrangement a peculiar feline ferocity scarcely in accord with the *féerique* delicacy of her other features, the sensitive nose with its slight concavity of bridge and the light, tawny eyes, very long and narrow, and heavily fringed with a double set of black lashes. Her fine hair, dark in some lights and tawny in others, was profuse and bound snugly across a broad white forehead, in spite of which there escaped from it tendrils so fine and iridescent as to form an impalpable

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nimbus against the yellow glare from the window, where the late lurid sun was burning its way through the dusty mist without. She had changed into a jersey dress of fine material which fitted closely, so that it seemed less of a garment than some sort of medium incasing her perfect shoulders and bosom, and portraying in these physical traits a soft and yielding fullness which made the sheriff wonder why a few moments before he had thought her to be slenderly made.

Patricia rose, when the effect of her costume was enhanced as it fell, or rather clung, in flawless planes over hips that were not wide but full, terminating in a skirt that seemed to follow the contour of her limbs to the upper ankle, where it merged with fine silk stockings, distended as they rose from the slender ankles in a full rotundity. A dull glow burned through the tanned, swarthy cheeks of the sheriff. Patricia glanced through the window, then looked back at him over her shoulder with her eerie smile.

"And to think," said she, "that we hesitated to accept your hospitality because we thought it might be a strain upon the resources of a poor prairie farmer."

"Yes," said Stephan, "this is a country of revelations."

The sheriff looked a little puzzled. "What

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gave you that notion?" he asked. "Of course we don't put on much side out here, but there's no lack of money in this country and the people who work it. Why should there be? It's one of the great feeders of the world."

Sir Harold set down his glass. "Well, you see, old chap," said he, "we're all Europeans, and our ideas are European ones. Russia's a great wheat country, and so is the Argentine, for that matter, but in Russia cultivation is done by peasants, taxed to the ears and sometimes overhead, and in the Argentine they've got the peonage system. The landowner who gets the profits is a big mogul and overlord, and all he does is to rake in the spoof. It's a new idea to us to see a big landed proprietor running the show himself."

"Quite so," said Stephan. "You are so simple, so unaffected, so kind and frankly hospitable, and with none of the—how shall I say? —the show off—of the European landlord. We see the samples of your corn which have won blue ribbons, and the pictures of your cattle which have received the first award in the expositions. And now you show us these diamonds with no more pride in your achievements than if you had not done it all yourself. You labor your great ranch with your own hands and drive your tractors and herd your cattle with the cowboys, yet you are probably several

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times a millionaire. It is amazing, and so contrary to our European point of view. A Russian in your position would do nothing but amuse himself in Petrograd or Paris, and an Argentinean in Buenos Aires or Paris, and leave the handling of his estates to an intendant."

"And the joke of it is," said Patricia, looking down at him with one hand on her hip, "you could buy out all four of your distinguished guests with a handful of those pebbles on the table."

The sheriff glanced up at her in surprise, then looked inquiringly at Léontine, who smiled and nodded.

"That is quite true," said she. "We are all four of us war paupers. My brother and I lost all our property in the Russian débâcle, even our money in the banks being seized by the Bolsheviki. Sir Harold was interested in velvet mills in eastern France, Lille and Roubaix, and these were plundered by the Germans. As for Patricia, she never had much of anything, poor dear. Her father, who was an American artist, married my sister when she was studying for her voice with Marchesi. He was very poor, and her estates were lost, like mine. So you see, Mr. Hartwell, you are entertaining a quartet of impoverished refugees, as one might say."

This information did not elicit the look of concern one might have expected to see upon

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the face of their host. On the contrary, his dark-blue eyes rested on Patricia with a burning look of satisfaction.

"Well, that's mighty hard luck," said he, in his deep, resonant voice, "but I reckon it happened to a good many over there. What brought you to this side, if you don't mind my asking?"

"To work for our living," Léontine answered. "We have all had to come to that. Noblemen are driving buses in London, and princes are selling automobiles. We had saved a little from the wreck and we decided to pool our resources and emigrate to America. You will laugh when I tell you what we propose to attempt."

"I don't think I'll split my sides," said the sheriff. "Some people may get a sort of satisfaction in seeing high-born folks obliged to scratch for themselves, but I can't say I see anything funny about it. What are you going to tackle?"

"The motion pictures," Léontine answered. "You see, Mr. Hartwell, we are not entirely without our talents. Patricia, besides being pretty, is a tremendous athlete, and swims like an otter. Sir Harold is also athletic and a magnificent horseman. Before the war he had his racing stables and was a famous polo player, while my brother can play admirably the role of foreign nobleman. They may cast him for

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the villain's role, and some day you may see him on the screen luring innocent girls to destruction or swindling rich bankers or something of the sort."

The sheriff glanced with curiosity at Stephan, and, despite his quality of host, was forced to admit secretly that the Russian would fit admirably some such role.

"As for poor me," Léontine continued, "I was always considered excellent in amateur theatricals, and a motion-picture man to whom I talked in New York told me my face and general build would screen well, as I have wide, Slavic features, which seem to match, and that fullness which comes—*hélas!*—of approaching middle age. We have some letters to a producer, so here we are, four exiled emigrants, toiling on our way to that Mecca of ambitious actors, Los Angeles. We are going first to San Francisco, where we have friends who may be of some assistance."

The sheriff surveyed them with a look of amused admiration, then gave his boyish laugh. "Well," said he, "I must say I admire your sand, and, take it from me, folks, if you don't put it across it will be because there's something wrong with the eyes of these movie people."

And again his eager gaze swept over Patricia's elfin face and full, but exquisite, curves.

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She turned to the window to look out, and the dull saffron glare threw her into silhouette, seeming to gild her sweeping outlines, and the feline, supple grace of her movements reminded the sheriff of a puma he had once captured and caged. Léontine, watching him closely, did not miss the rise of his big chest at the intake of a sudden breath.

The conversation turned to different topics, while outside the lurid day darkened, when the sheriff got up and switched on the lights.

"I make my own electricity," he said. "It ain't so bad here, after all, when you get used to it, and you folks are seeing the country under its worst condition. Six weeks earlier you'd have found it an ocean of wheat, and when the snow falls it is sort of like the Arctic regions, I reckon; but just now, with everything dried up and the air full of dust and this gale of wind blowing, I agree with you it's pretty bad. To tell the honest truth I hate the place, and with good reason. It killed my mother from privation and overwork and loneliness and monotony. There were no flivvers or mail orders or movies in those days. After she was gone and I was sixteen I fell out with my father and left home. He was a hard man and forgot I was too big to take a whipstock to. I worked my way up into Wisconsin, and there I got the idea to go to college, and I hauled down my degree, thanks

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to a fine old man of the faculty, Professor Parkinson. Then I drifted round from place to place, logging and taking rich Easterners hunting. It was from them that I got my ideas of how to live decently even on a ranch.

"After that I studied telegraphy and got a job of station agent on the U. P. That put ideas in my head, too, because I was at a junction, and there was an eating house famous for good grub, and the big through trains used to stop, sometimes for an hour or more, and I'd talk with the tourists." He checked himself suddenly, his eyes still on Patricia. "Then father died, worn out by fighting drought and grasshoppers and mortgages. Some years the crops would look like a tree that stood beside a house burned down, and everybody would be mortgaged to the ears, and the next year everything would be green and luscious, and there'd come a flight of locusts, grasshoppers—and everything eaten to the roots, with the year's work gone to blazes. Excuse my language, folks, but let me tell you it was hell. But I'd taken courses in scientific agriculture and it wasn't long before I'd got the thing on a paying basis."

"And you never married?" asked Stephan.

"No, sir. For one thing, I hadn't the heart to put any woman through what my mother suffered—and there were other reasons." Again

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he checked himself. "Well, let's talk of something interesting. Tell me about Europe. I figure to see it before very long. That's always been my idea. The first half of my life for work and the second half to see the world and meet interesting people."

Léontine led the conversation into other channels. Stephan and Sir Harold, urged by their host, did not spare the excellent whisky. The talk grew animated, for despite their criminality these people had known the best and were all possessed of their individual charm. Patricia said little. She seemed to coil herself into a great chair, precisely like the puma, as the sheriff saw her, and her strange, lambent eyes, with their upward slant and tawny, greenish tints, frequently met his with a sort of alluring fascination. After the first glass with his guests he drank no more, and before long the Chinaman came to the doorway, rubbing his palms, and said, with a little duck: "Supper, leddy. Please all chow."

They went into the simple, but attractive, dining room to what was really a delicious meal—chicken gumbo and a saddle of roast lamb with hominy and sweet potatoes, and a salad of sliced tomatoes, with a big pitcher of ice-cold milk for Léontine and Patricia and whisky and soda for the men. After that a rice pudding with plums and cream, and a big

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bowl of fruit. Léontine complimented the sheriff on his fare. He laughed.

"I told you I learned something from these rich Easterners I used to guide. My, but they know how to live! And there was never any lack of game in camp in those days. Not much left in these parts, but later on the wild geese come into the stubble. In the spring, when the prairies begin to bloom, it's right pretty if you can see it that way." He looked at Patricia. "You don't believe that, do you, Miss Melton?"

Patricia slowly shook her head. "I'm afraid my imagination is not up to it," said she, "but it makes me admire you all the more for having stuck at it so determinedly and made it yield up riches. What I wonder at still more is that you have kept your cheerfulness and kindness."

The meal passed pleasantly, and when it was over the sheriff went to the door and looked out. The wind was going down, and a huge yellow moon, just above the horizon and flattened like a football, was glowing through the dust haze.

"Going to be fine to-morrow, but hot," said the sheriff. "I sent a man off in the big car to telegraph to Denver for a new transmission box, which ought to come late to-morrow. Then it may take us half a day to get it set up. One of my hands is a good mechanic and he'll dismount the other so as to be all ready. I reckon you'll have to count on one more night here."

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They protested a little at this abuse of his hospitality, then Léontine said: "I can assure you, Mr. Hartwell, that it will be no hardship for us. We are all pretty fagged from our long journey, and the rest will do us no end of good."

"I reckon we can pass the time somehow," answered their host. "You folks all ride, I take it, and I've got some good horses in the corral; not much to look at, but good stock and easy gaited. You ladies will have to ride astride; but I see from the magazines that all the fashionable folks have come to that now."

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Chapter V

PATRICIA and the two men retired early, but Léontine lingered to talk to Mr. Hartwell, their host. The man interested and attracted her, and she desired to know him better. Perhaps she felt instinctively that he might have something to say to her, and in this her intuition was correct, for presently he remarked, abruptly, "Your niece, Miss Melton, is the most beautiful girl I ever saw."

Léontine smiled. "Patricia's beauty is of an unusual type."

"That's just it," he answered, eagerly. "When they made her they broke the mold! I don't believe there's another like her on earth. I'd never have believed there was any such girl. She's like a fairy, but a splendid, strong, wonderful sort of fairy."

"Be careful not to tell her so," warned Léontine. "Other people have made the same remark, and for some reason it angers her. It would sound very silly to you if I were to tell you that her father's mother, who was of the Irish nobility, was said to be a sort of witch. The peasants of the region where she lived were

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all afraid of her, and used to cross themselves when she passed. None of them would go near the castle at night if they could help it. Of course Ireland is full of superstitions, but I often feel there is something uncanny about Patricia. Many people are tremendously attracted to her, while others she seems to repel."

"You can put me in the first class," said the sheriff in his vibrant voice. "I reckon it's not the thing for me to say, countess, being just a plain ranchman, but the minute I laid eyes on her I felt as if I had grabbed a live wire."

Léontine shook her finger at him in smiling reproof. "Ah! That's because you are a very strong man and you live alone. You should have married years ago."

"Well, there was another reason besides what I told you about not feeling right in bringing a woman here. You remember I spoke about being station agent on the U. P.?"

"Yes."

"That gave me a different idea of girls. These big through trains used to stop there, and the passengers get out and walk round and frolic, and often I'd come out to sort of entertain them like they were my guests. Nearly always there'd be some wonderful girls with beautiful faces and soft hair nicely done up and dressed like the pictures you see in the magazines of society girls. I used to call them my Pullman girls—

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to myself, I mean. Sometimes I would talk to one who would make such an impression on me I'd think of her for days."

"You'd fall in love?"

"No. It wasn't just that. I'd say to myself: 'Bob, those girls are not for you. You're not their kind.' And then I'd say: 'Why not? Why shouldn't I win one like that some day?' It sort of took away my interest in our prairie girls, and some of these were mighty pretty, too. But I wanted class. I wanted that fine, smooth sort that dressed just right and spoke just right and knew what it was to live in fine houses with servants to wait on them, and go to dances and theaters and opera and travel with high-toned people. I said to myself, 'You make your pile, boy, and then we'll see.'"

He rose suddenly from his chair and began to stride up and down. "And now, countess, I've made my pile, and if I don't cut me out one I'll know the reason why. But somehow since I've seen Miss Melton these others seem like pink, fluffy children. I've seen a real woman, and it's put me off all the rest."

Léontine appeared to reflect for a moment. Despite her past criminal life, with its outrageous episodes, there was a quality about this plainsman which moved her. Unlike Patricia, Léontine's unlawful past had contained its love episodes, these of varying duration, depending

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principally upon the caprice of her temperamental Slavic nature. It was impossible for Léontine to think of life without love, just as it might be impossible for one to think of life without food and sleep and other vital necessities. But knowing Patricia as well as she did, Léontine did not believe that this curiously typeless girl had ever so much as submitted to the slightest masculine caress. They were both thieves—master thieves, thoroughly trained in a finished school of crime, and though their natures were alike in a relish for the game itself and for its increment, there was this difference between them, that Léontine had always worked with a partner, like a marauding lioness, whereas Patricia had always worked alone. And there was a more sinister difference of method. Léontine had always hated bloodshed; not shrunk from it precisely, but deplored it as unsportsmanlike, and only necessary where there was a lack of finesse. But she was now convinced that Patricia, like Chu-Chu the Shearer, loved to combine a killing with a theft. There was something inhuman about this girl which, though it did not repel Léontine, often appalled her.

Léontine, in the course of the war, when she had given herself to the service of the Allied cause, had found her soul. She was still a criminal in spite of herself, but rather as a musician would be obliged to remain a musician even

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though he found the profession of cowboy more profitable. But her experiences had softened her, whereas those of Patricia, an alleged propagandist, which had brought her in contact with a great many different sorts of men, appeared to have made her a sort of anthrophobiac. Léontine knew that Patricia hated men as sincerely as a cat hates dogs. Sir Harold and Stephan knew this even better than Léontine. So now the beautiful Russian cosmopolitan thief regarded the sheriff a good deal as some months before she might have looked with pitying eyes at a poilu brought in and shot through the abdomen—a fatal case. But then, Patricia was a fatal girl, and men had loved her with that result which legend attaches to the wooing of a siren or Nereid or water nymph.

Léontine was rather sorry for the sheriff, but she could think of nothing much to do for him; so she answered, gently: "A great many men, some high, some low, some clever, and some merely rich, have wanted to marry Patricia. She has never listened to one for a moment. I confess I don't understand such a nature as hers any more than I do a masculine one like yours, which can live womanless. You may be a ranchman by profession, but I should say you were an idealist, perhaps a poet, at heart."

The sheriff shook his head. "No, countess," said he, "you've got me wrong. I can see what

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you mean, though. I've known men like that, who live, so to speak, up in the clouds. But my life has been close to the earth. I love the soil. I love to help it do the work for which God Almighty intended it. Let me tell you, countess, that there have been days in the early summer when I have ridden over the prairie and seen it green with sprouting crops as far as the eye could reach, and rich with the promise of an abundant rich yield. Somehow I never looked at it the way a good many of my neighbors do, and never went back to figure out in dollars and cents what it was going to bring me if we worked through without some sort of blight. It seemed to me to cut deeper than that—and when I've seen the crops waist high and strong and vigorous, and the breeze running through in waves, and smelled the corn tassels, it made me feel like a father to the whole thing—as if the crops were my children, and sometimes I've sat on my horse and looked out across it and felt as if I wanted to cry."

"I was right," murmured Léontine. "I said you were a poet."

The sheriff laughed, not in his boyish way, but with a short, ironic mirth.

"Some of the men I've had to go after and get might not agree with you, countess. I like poetry, and I read it a good deal winter nights when I'm alone, but I'm no poet."

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"What men have you had to go after and get?" Léontine asked.

"Well, you see, I'm sheriff, and every place has got its roughnecks, and sometimes there's trouble. It's stopped mostly since I was sheriff here," he added, with unconscious egoism. "They have found out that it ain't worth while with me on the job."

"Are you so severe?" Léontine asked. "So conscientious in your duty to the state?"

The sheriff appeared to reflect for a brief instant. "No, I don't think it's altogether that," said he. "But I just naturally hate a thief like my old collie hates a coyote. I can't abide dishonest people, and then, when they get rounded up and turn and show their fangs, it kills whatever mercy might be in me. In the old days we had a good many of that sort trailin' along the big continental lines. Twice I was held up in my station, and both times—" He checked himself suddenly. Léontine leaned forward, her dark eyes burning into his.

"What?" she breathed.

"Oh, don't let's talk about it," said the sheriff. "I'm gettin' away from my subject."

"Please, Mr. Hartwell, I want to know. What happened?"

"It ain't the sort of thing to talk about to a lady."

"But I insist. You don't know how much

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you have interested me, and you can't shock a woman who served at the front during this terrible war."

The sheriff looked embarrassed. "That's so," said he. "It's plain to see you're not a Pullman girl, nor Miss Melton, either. Well, then, one time I managed to get to my gun, and killed all four. The other time I crawled out pretty well shot up, but nothing to cripple me, and got me together a posse and killed 'em in the rocks on the edge of the Black Hills. They didn't mean to go to jail and I didn't want to take 'em there. Two of 'em had been friends of mine and I sent the daughters of one of them to school." He gave a short, apologetic laugh. "We don't do things here like they do in the East. When good men go wrong they don't play the bet with their money. They play it with their lives. Now look here, countess, I've got clean away from what I wanted to tell you."

Léontine dropped her elbows on the table, cupped her chin in her hands, and gave him a look that had turned the heads of more worldly men. Her lips were slightly apart and there was a glow on her high, Slavic cheek bones. If the sheriff had possessed the slightest feministic experience he would have felt at once a conquest not far removed. For, despite her elegance and finished perfection of *femme du monde*,

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Léontine had been for many years a thief and the associate of thieves, not all of whom were such finished products as herself. She was a past mistress of crime and of fatal criminal men, in most of whom the ferocious beast was not far below the surface, and it had always been the primitive, the elemental in a man which, backed by a ruthless courage which in such malefactors often obtained, most appealed to her.

But now, at the age of thirty-six, her nature had changed. Recent war experiences had taught her that men could be just as ferocious at times, with an even higher courage and more indomitable strength, than are to be found in the criminal class. She had tended men fresh from the carnage, with the glare of battle still blazing in their eyes, to render them nearly rabid for hours afterward. Her point of view had undergone a renaissance. She was still criminal herself from long association with this class, but her brilliant and passionate temperamental mind had deflected her admiration from its former objectives, such types as the polished Count Ivan, master of thieves, and the dread Chu-Chu the Shearer, his chief operative.

The sheriff had impressed her from the first as a man of iron nature, inflexibility of will and purpose, and a certain grim ruthlessness directed not against society, but against its enemies. She

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felt that he could be as fatal as Chu-Chu himself, though from a different angle; that he was a sworn enemy to wrongdoers, to whom, in the pursuit of his official duties, he would show scant mercy; and that, once started on the trail of any objective, whether it be man or woman or merely the conquest of the soil, he was not one to be deflected from his purpose. It was true that they were dog and she-wolf, but in her case the lupine strain was not without its influence of domestication just as his canine one held its full measure of the wild. So their types converged, and though she still possessed a primitive hatred for the upholders of the law, this man was not without his powerful appeal to her.

Physically he pleased her infinitely. She did not insist that a man should have a mundane polish in look or speech or *savoir-faire*. It was the force in him that was her lure, and she was thrilled by his sheer virility and strength, while subtly enticed by face and features, lined and weather-roughened, but bold and clean cut and handsome in their molding.

For a moment she was conscious of a flame of resentment against Patricia. It seemed to Léontine that if this man had fallen under the spell of her own great charm and beauty with the same concentrated passion, she could scarcely have refused him. But she knew that

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Patricia, aside from her curious aversion to men as a sex, was also fastidious to the point of repulsion to an individual who, though masculine, was not to the last degree a finished product. She had always suspected the girl of having been stirred by the only two men who had ever mastered her, not only in finesse, but by *force majeure:* one Captain Phineas Plunkett, and Clamp, the peddler, both gentlemen in every sense of the word, both young and with the scrupulous nicety at every point to be found in the gentleman athlete or sportsman.

She could not imagine Patricia being moved by such a man as the sheriff, whose powerful hands were toil-roughened, and features seamed, not with age, but exposure to such weather as they had recently sampled. His cleanliness was that of the out-of-doors, and it permeated him to an extent which one might not often find in the mere surface cleanliness of the city man. One felt his very soul to be clean, but this actual fact was not such as to make its appeal to the subtle malice of Patricia's bad-fairy nature.

So now, as he stared at Léontine with a burning eagerness in his clear blue eyes, she shook her head and answered, gently: "You must put Miss Melton out of your mind, dear host. Something has been left out in the making of her. I doubt if any man has ever won even so

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much as her friendship, let alone her love. She may flirt, but in a malicious way, as if she liked to tantalize. Her enticements are those of a siren or wicked fairy. I don't believe that any man has ever moved her."

The sheriff did not look convinced. His thick, black eyebrows drew a straight line across his broad forehead, and beneath them the eyes, unusually clear, shone like sapphires, while his face set with a sort of grim satisfaction at Léontine's statement.

"So much the better," said he. "That gets rid of one obstacle, since there's nobody else in the way. But, after all, she's human, countess."

"Some of us are not so sure," murmured Léontine.

"Oh, shucks! I beg your pardon, but I've got no faith in this different-from-anybody-else theory. We've all got our bodies to live in while we're on this old earth, and those bodies have their natural feelings. If we're healthy —and Miss Melton is certainly that—no young woman made as perfect as she is can be shy the instincts that make men men, and women women."

"But haven't you lived all these years womanless, yourself?"

"Maybe I was waiting for the hour when the alarm clock goes off. Well, it's come."

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"Perhaps Patricia is waiting, too," Léontine suggested.

"Maybe. But if that's the case it's up to me to set it ringing. Listen, countess. Somehow I can't believe that a man as strong as I am could feel as I do about this girl and not get some reaction in her. I'm a lot older, of course, in years. But, for one thing, I've run like a well-oiled, well-driven machine, without much wear or friction. Good, hard, healthy work doesn't age a sound man. And besides, I've got a mighty strong hunch that a young fellow her own age wouldn't be the proper mate for a girl like that. She'll need some holding. I've handled blooded stock and I know the traits. My own family is a good, sound Colonial one that emigrated out here from the East when my father was a boy. I'm rich, even for to-day, and I figure to be a lot richer. She wouldn't have to live here. We'd go where she liked and live where she liked, in any way she might choose. You tell me she hasn't got a cent herself and is going to tackle the movies. That's no job for a thoroughbred like her. The day she married me—if she could ever see it that way—I'll settle a cold million on her, and if at the end of a year's time she thinks she's made a mistake she can leave me and go her own way—get a divorce—anything she likes. If I can't hold her after twelve months I'll take

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my loss without whining. Only it wouldn't be a loss! A million would be a piker's sum to pay for having her that long."

His burning eyes and deep, vibrant voice sent little thrills through Léontine. Her Slavic nature responded to such wooing even though oblique. The sheriff saw the wavering in her face, and a swarth flush spread over his own.

"Let's look at it from another slant," said he. "Maybe she's got so set in her idea of playing a lone hand that she can't see it differently. She needs to be trained, steered in the natural direction that most people follow for themselves. Habits of thought are like habits of body and sometimes need a rough jolt to put them right. I don't want to boast, but I might as well tell you that I've never found it very hard to bring people or animals to my way of thinking. I've arrested a mob of holdups unarmed, and brought 'em into town, and they'll tell you that I'm the best horse breaker in this state, and that's going some. Two of my boys and I once roped a full-grown she-puma, and I put her in a cage and in three months' time I could pull her ears and pet her. Women I don't know much about, but deep down underneath I've got the strongest sort of hunch that I could win this girl once I had my way with her."

Léontine appeared to reflect for a brief instant. The situation presented itself to her in

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its fullest dramatic value. Here was a strong, rugged, hard-working plainsman who had saved himself all these years for the one woman of his choice, now selecting, of all the beautiful women in the world, one in whom at times she was inclined to doubt the existence of a soul. Moreover, he was a stern, uncompromising servant of the law, had just expressed to her in vigorous terms not only his professional but personal abomination of criminals, and his choice had fallen on a woman whom Léontine, in her wide experience of such, felt fully convinced to be the most absolute criminal nature she had ever encountered. She knew Patricia for an arch-thief by choice, believed her to be without the honor held by some to exist between the members of her outlawed fraternity, had proof that the girl was a potential, even more, an attempted murderess of the most cold-blooded type. She did not doubt that Patricia would cheerfully plan the murder of their host for the bag of rough diamonds he had shown them if a reasonable avenue of escape was offered her.

And yet she did not believe that the girl, though nearly at the end of her resources, would give herself to the man for a day, let alone a year, for the million he offered. She did not believe that Patricia had ever, even to gain her ends, submitted to a man's caress. The story she had told the sheriff of their plan of attempt-

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ing to engage themselves for the motion pictures was, of course, untrue. At the first appearance of Léontine, Patricia, and Stephan upon the screen they would have run the risk of deportation, while Howard Townley, alias Sir Harold Trimble, would have been sent in irons to France, there to expiate a murder under the knife of the guillotine, though possibly his features, altered by mustache and heavy Vandyke, might have prevented recognition until seen by some person of uncommonly keen observation and upon whose visual sense they were ineradicably stamped. And Léontine knew there were two such persons—three, in fact—Calvert Steele, Juanita Heming, and the girl Agnes ——, late of the Salvation Army, to whom he had been engaged.

So here was Patricia, the soulless, the terrible, and yet the inviolate, which last fact made her, to one of Léontine's mistaken but ardent soul, even more sinister. In the days of her nefarious practices Léontine's feminine associates had, like herself, worked in couples with their criminal mates. She had never known a lone leopardess like Patricia, and she could not understand her, had no point of observation from which to gauge her. Now, for the first time, Léontine was glad that such was the case. Policeman though he might be, and therefore her feudal enemy, she could not withhold a

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liking and respect for the sheriff, and, besides, he was a different sort of policeman. He was not the stealthy, pad-footed, prying sleuth against whom she had so often matched her wits, but more of the soldier, the scout, whose dealings were in the open, armed and mounted, and conducting his campaign in a raw country against bandits and desperadoes, cattle stealers, train and bank robbers, openly defiant of the law and resisting it almost as openly as he himself maintained it.

Looking at him now as he watched her with the eager eyes of a deep-chested hound awaiting the signal to take the trail, Léontine with some difficulty repressed a gust of mirth. It was too ridiculous, this man in his frank innocence desiring to claim Patricia for his mate. The sheriff saw the twinkling of her eyes, and smiled himself, albeit ruefully.

"You think I'm crazy," he muttered.

"No; there's nothing preposterous about your demands. Many a woman would jump at them. I'm not at all sure but that I might be tempted myself."

The sheriff gave his short, boyish laugh at this naïve admission.

"Don't kid me, countess," said he. "Then you don't think there's any hope?"

Léontine shook her head. "Not the slightest," she answered, "but that has nothing to

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do with your being what you are. But there's something lacking in Patricia. If you like I'll tell her what you have confided in me; or, if you prefer, you might tell her yourself."

The sheriff nodded. "I've always asked for what I wanted," said he, doggedly—"that is, when I haven't taken it without asking, as I did that she-panther I was telling you about. I'll ask her before she leaves, then you can back me up if you feel like it. After all, it's no insult to a woman to tell her that you want to marry her."

"You can count on my support," said Léontine, "but don't let that raise any false hopes. Unless I am much mistaken, my dear host, the man who takes Patricia will have to employ the same methods you used with that pantheress."

"Well," muttered the sheriff, "perhaps some day it might come to that."

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Chapter VI

THE following morning broke still and clear, as the sheriff had predicted. There was a golden haze in the atmosphere, which was still charged to some extent with the impalpable dust which could be washed from it only by a drenching rain. But this very quality gave a wonderful refraction of the solar spectrum, lending a color effect to the air that was fine and stimulating at that altitude of perhaps three thousand feet.

When nearly at noon the guests assembled in the living room they were told by the smiling Charley that the sheriff had gone out early, leaving orders that they were not to be disturbed and promising to return before lunch.

"Sheliff, he go 'long office one hour two hour evely morning," the Chinaman informed them. "Hab got hoose-gow, along lailload station."

"Hoose-gow?" Léontine questioned.

"Allee samee jail. Nobody lock up now." His eyes twinkled at them mischievously. "Maybe pletty soon findee plisoner. One young fellow man deputy sheliff, he stop 'long jail. Mr. Hartwell, he stop 'long here." His slanting eyes

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glinted through their narrow slits with an expression that seemed to hold some uncanny intelligence. "Bad people no getaway boss."

Léontine dropped her chin on her knuckles and regarded the Chinaman with a thoughtful expression. "No," said she, "I imagine Mr. Hartwell would not be an easy man to get away from."

"Looks better than it did last night," Sir Harold commented to Patricia, toward whom and Léontine he preserved always the friendly respect that might have obtained if they had been actually such people as they professed to be. Stephan he regarded with a contempt he was careful not to show, as in the case of any person who might still be of use to him in some way. It was plain enough that Stephan, unmanaged by Léontine, was little better than a cheap but astute crook, and that he got his rating through the reflected glory of Chu-Chu, whose disciple he had been and whom he had served as a sort of combination secretary, fence, and body servant. There was plenty of sinister evil in Stephan, and more than the average intelligence; but he was yellow at the core, of insufficient courage for a daring coup, but a finished man of the world in speech and conduct and experience, a bogus nobleman, and rather timid thief. Perhaps his most useful quality in his association with Léontine and

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her machinations was that of male protector, plus the fact that he stood so thoroughly in awe of her and Patricia that it is doubtful if even in the pinch of the trap he would have dared betray them any more than he would have dared betray his master during his lifetime.

Patricia looked out at the broad expanse through narrowed eyes. "I can't say that I find much improvement," said she, in reply to Sir Harold's remark. "The more I see of this region the less I care for it, merely because there is just so much more of it in evidence."

"Well," said Sir Harold, "since he showed us that bag of diamonds I've got a different slant at it—just as you might have of an ugly woman wearing a tiara and a rope of pearls. Too bad we can't scoff those pebbles, but there doesn't seem any way to manage the business."

"Even I could open that old iron box without much effort," murmured Stephan, in French. He rose and closed the doors into the dining room.

"And what then?" asked Léontine, sharply, in the same tongue. "How far do you think we could get with them? The mere lonesomeness of this place is what makes it so impossible."

"It is doubly annoying," said Stephan, "because our war chest is getting so very low.

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Unless we can turn a trick pretty soon, even a little one, I do not see quite how we are to manage. The car will not bring much, and we must arrange somehow to get to Honolulu and thence to Japan. Now, if only our dear Patricia could see her way to help her comrades, if only for a little while—" For Léontine had told them of the sheriff's declaration.

Patricia shot him a glance of scorn.

"When your dear Patricia is obliged to throw her person into the pool," said she, "two things are going to happen: The first, that she admits defeat and stands by the bargain, as any other failure; and the second, that it will take a richer and younger and stronger specimen than this worthy host of ours."

Léontine raised her delicately arched eyebrows. "I doubt that you find a stronger, my dear. He is really very much of a man."

Patricia did not appear to be listening. Her *féerique* face with its mobile mouth was set, and her long eyes with their upward slant looked through the window toward the creamy distance, where a small herd of cattle seemed to be moving across the prairie in the direction of the corral.

"He said last night that he meant to follow us into Denver in his car to transact some business and put his diamonds in a safe place," said she. "It is a very lonely road, which one

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can see for miles, and he will probably be alone, as he was when we first met him."

Léontine glanced at her sharply. "Nonsense!" said she. "What are you trying to say?"

"It must be known that he has those diamonds," continued Patricia in her purring voice. "If he were to be found killed in his car, why should the act necessarily be fastened on four harmless tourists, especially such people as ourselves?"

Sir Harold's eyes fastened on her with a gleam as cold and hard as those of the stones in question.

"*Grand Dieu!*" he muttered. "That might be managed."

"And again it might not," cut in Léontine. "The bigger the country, the easier it is to fasten a crime. We would be known to have traveled that road, and we would be closely examined and our true identities discovered. You will have to think of something better than that, Patricia."

"Could you not marry him and then bolt?" suggested Stephan.

"Rubbish!" said Patricia. "He might settle a million on me, but in securities. Do you think he's going to hand it over in money as soon as the benediction is pronounced? And where could I bolt to? We are not in Paris or

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London, but in the heart of a very big and, so far as one can see, a very empty, continent. Besides, though he is a plainsman, I do not think he would be an easy man to fool."

"Quite so," Sir Harold agreed. "I know his sort. Those chaps are ready to trust you, but they keep a jolly good eye on you all the same." His cold, closely set eyes followed Patricia's gaze. "Here comes somebody driving in a string of horses. Let's walk over to the corral and see what sort of stock our good host breeds."

They went out and strolled in the direction of the corral, and as they did so Léontine said: "Probably our mounts for this afternoon. Suppose we three say we'd rather rest and let Patricia ride with him alone. The situation might develop something, if only a friendly loan; and, as Stephan says, we could do with a little cash. My poor few remaining jewels are part of my setting."

They reached the corral, beside which a small bunch of cattle, those they had seen the day before, were browsing at a heap of fodder, among them the young bull they had noticed on nearing the ranch house. This prospective sire raised its head and surveyed them with a regard that was anything but friendly, especially as its wild, rolling eyes fastened on Patricia's cerise silk sweater.

"That little chap looks spiteful," said Sir

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Harold. "You girls get up on the fence. Can't count on range cattle, especially when you're afoot."

Stephan hurriedly assisted Léontine up, then followed her example, but Patricia's wide mouth whipped up in its scornful smile.

"Oh, bosh!" said she. "I'm not afraid of any mangy little baby bull."

The horses were approaching rapidly, some at a long trot, some loping, and others with their mile-consuming pace. Glancing in their direction, the guests discovered that it was their host himself who herded them. The sheriff was riding with the easy, long-stirruped cowboy's seat, encouraging the laggards with the swing of his looped lariat. None of the ranch hands were about, but as they stood there, watching the horses being driven in, the Chinaman ran out of the kitchen door, then paused, and shouted something to them in his pidgin English.

"He says to get up on the fence," said Sir Harold to Patricia, "and he's right. There might be a rank stallion or something in that bunch."

But Patricia did not heed this admonition. The first of the drove of horses, a dozen, perhaps, swung up and entered the corral with snorts. They were in the rough, but to the experienced eyes of Sir Harold showed race. And then, as the last were entering and the sheriff loping up,

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perhaps two hundred yards away, the young bull, as though excited by the thudding of their hoofs, appeared suddenly to decide that he was lacking in his duty as protector of the premises. His tail stiffened, he shook his adolescent horns, pawed the ground for an instant; then, lowering his head, charged straight for Patricia.

In due credit to Sir Harold it may be said that, interested in the horses, he did not observe this maneuver in time to be of any service. Nor, for that matter, did Patricia, until the bull was almost upon her. A shriek from Léontine, which was echoed by Stephan, warned her barely in time. She turned quickly, to see the bull bearing down upon her, not twenty yards away, and as the little beast plunged forward she sprang nimbly aside. The bull went into the corral fence with a crash that came near to dislodging the two perched above and a little at the right, and Stephan's yell of terror was echoed by a wilder one from the sheriff.

And then an astonishing thing occurred, for as the bull recovered itself and turned, slightly dazed, Patricia sprang toward him. Her round arms, bare to the elbow, flashed out and her two hands fastened on the short, gleaming horns. There was a sudden wrench, a strangled bellow, and the next instant the astonished bull was on its back, floundering and kicking wildly, with Patricia kneeling on its head. At the same in-

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stant the sheriff's lariat uncoiled snakily in air, the loop falling over the bull's hind legs, to be drawn instantly taut, and, the trained horse pivoting, the aggressive bovine was dragged a few paces away.

Patricia sprang up with a silvery laugh and she stood contemplating the scene with genuine amusement, then yielded to Sir Harold's insistence that she climb up on the fence. The sheriff rose up, his face a pale saffron beneath its tan.

"Lord Almighty!" he gasped. "That's what I get for leaving you."

"No," said Patricia, "that's what the bull gets for being impudent. I hope it teaches him a lesson."

"Bless me, if I ever saw the like!" cried the sheriff. "Where do you get that strength, young lady?"

"I carry it round with me in case of presumptuous bulls or men, Mr. Hartwell."

The blue eyes kindled as they stared down upon her. The bull, neglected, kicked its legs free from the loop, struggled up, snorted, stood for a moment looking dazed and puzzled, then moved off sulkily at the whistle of the sheriff's quirt. The sheriff drew out a bandanna and mopped his face, which was moist from the sudden shock at this danger to his guest of guests.

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"It's all my fault," said he, "but I always took it for granted that ladies stood shy of cattle. Well, we've sure seen something, folks." He looked again with a mystified expression at Patricia, then shook his head. "I just got back from town and went out to drive in these horses so we might have a ride this afternoon. There's Charley calling us in for chow."

Throughout the appetizing meal the sheriff's eyes went constantly to Patricia with a puzzled look. He was trying to determine the source and quality of her uncanny strength, for, though any powerful man might grasp the horns of such an animal or even a full-grown steer and, getting past the point of leverage of the powerful neck muscles by a quick and unexpected twist, force the animal to throw itself, the very weight of the solid head seemed entirely disproportionate, less to the actual size of Patricia's bare forearms—for these were very full and round—than to their soft contour. Her fresh skin was of a fineness of texture that the calloused hand of the rancher could scarcely have felt, were he to stroke it lightly, and that same suggestion of rounded softness pervaded the whole of Patricia's personality.

To the mind of the sheriff muscular force was associated in the case of a man with brawn and bone, and the clean-cut, visible contours of knotty bunches of contractile tissue. In a wom-

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an such strength was more associated with a sort of tough, scrawny vigor, reddened hands, and a bleak face. He had never particularly interested himself in athletes or athletics for either sex. He had worked his way through college as a hired hand, in summer, and doing odd jobs in a smithy, welding tires for carts or sledges, preparing tools or the like, as his time permitted. College athletics for girls or boys he had regarded from a distance, and less as physical training than play, as one might watch the sports of children. He made the popular mistake of many strong workingmen in associating muscular force with a rough exterior and a sort of exclusive stock property of the laboring class.

So now he found himself sorely puzzled to account for Patricia's feat and the origin of the forces set in motion. There was also to mystify him the swift courage and fearless assurance that made it possible. A second's delay and the sturdy little bull would have tossed her over his shoulder or lowered his head and crushed her against the rails of the corral fence. She had profited by his slower bovine mentality to take him by surprise, but it seemed to the sheriff almost as if there had been some uncanny agency at work for which physical laws could scarcely account.

But he said no more about it at the time,

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determined to probe the problem later. It made him a little sick to think of the tragedy that might have happened, and this, with the breathless emotion inspired when his eyes rested on Patricia, made him slightly confused, took away his appetite, and interfered with the natural easy flow of his conversation when entertaining guests. His duties of host were often requisitioned. His acquaintanceship was very wide—in Denver, Colorado Springs, Pueblo, Montrose, and other towns—and, as the ranch was known for its hospitality and but a little off the transcontinental road, residents of the region motoring through with their families frequently paid him a visit en route, finding always a warm welcome. This constituted the sheriff's social life as well as playing a part in his activities of office, as people came frequently to consult him in the righting of some wrong. The midday meal was excellent, a dinner, in fact, and the guests did it full justice. Afterward the sheriff suggested that a little later they might care to ride.

Léontine excused herself on the ground that she was more tired than she could have realized, and would prefer to rest. Stephan said that he was greatly interested in certain books relating to the country which he had discovered on the bookshelves, while Sir Harold's apology for declining the invitation was that, having acted as

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chauffeur for the last two weeks, his correspondence was sadly in arrears, and he would be glad of the opportunity to get through some rather important letters. But Patricia agreed to the proposal with a smile which showed her strong white teeth, and the peculiar lifting of her long, left eyebrow.

"I'm never tired," said she, "and I've no one to write to, and I never read except aboard ship."

"How about riding clothes?" said the sheriff.

"I've got some in my valise—at least the breeches and gaiters. You see, Mr. Hartwell, they're part of an ambitious movie actress's equipment."

She went out, presently to return dressed as if for a canter in the Bois. The eyes of the ranchman blazed brighter than ever at sight of her. She wore a silk shirt with a green necktie, a soft hat of the same shade, and her long, round legs were snugly incased in thin, pliant morocco gaiters. Small silver spurs completed the smartness of her appearance. The sheriff had never seen her like in real life, but was familiar with it in the motion pictures.

"You look like you had just stepped down off the screen," said he. "I often wondered if girls really dressed that way to ride or if it wasn't just made up." He gave his boyish laugh. "A few years ago a gentleman I used to guide sent me one of these big white Russian

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wolf hounds—a *borzoi* he called him. If we only had that dog now we'd be all fixed for a swell turnout—the beautiful lady with the dog, and the ranchman guide. Now I'll go out and saddle up. I'm mostly single handed since harvest time; got all hands over yonder sifting dirt for diamonds."

"But do you feel quite safe about that?" Stephan asked.

"Safe as the United States mint, sir. There ain't a man on my place wouldn't be shot sooner than rob me of a nickel or shoot anyone else he thought might be trying it. Sometime or other I've been able to do something for each of 'em, and out in this country folks don't often forget a good turn, or at least until they've squared the account. I wouldn't have a person here I couldn't trust with that bag of rocks I showed you last night. You see, our Western folks sort of get sifted into two lots—those on the square and those that ain't; and it don't take long for us to get a line on which are which. Well, make yourselves as comfy as you can, friends. If there's anything you want just holler for Charley. We'll be back in a couple of hours."

He rose in his light, springy way. "I'll go with you," said Patricia, "and help you saddle up."

They walked out to the corral, the sheriff

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treading the air, as it seemed to him. Patricia, in her riding clothes, impressed him in some way as smaller, though her actual height was a scant two inches less than his. But she seemed to fit in better with the place, less removed in sex and character, more obtainable, the distance between them diminished; to the eyes of the sheriff a wonderful pal of a girl in boy's clothes, and her speech and manner enhanced the impression.

They walked to the corral, where the sheriff picked up a lariat and deftly roped a horse.

"This one's Starlight—half Arab, half mustang, which makes her all Arab, I guess, because they claim our wild mustangs are Arab stock brought over by the Spaniards years ago. She is docile and nicely gaited. I broke her myself." He threw a light Texas saddle across the mare, and showed Patricia how to pass the cinch knot so that it lay flat. "Most times I could whistle her up to me, but they get a mite skittish after being turned out awhile. I'll ride that pinto. He's just plain horse, but has got more sense than most men. Maybe you noticed how he straightened out that sassy young bull that tried to get fresh with you. This ain't properly a cattle country, but I like to keep a little bunch because I'm fond of stock. There's no great market for horses nowadays, with flivvers and tractors, more's the pity."

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They mounted, and as the horses ambled off the sheriff looked at Patricia with a glowing smile. "It's easy to see you're no stranger to a horse," said he. "I figure to make you hate this country a little less before you leave it."

"I am beginning to like it better already," she answered. "It's nice to ride straight off into the distance this way and not bother about a road."

"Of course it ain't like the open ranges," said the sheriff. "My property is mostly wire fenced, but the pastures are so big you don't notice it much. Suppose we ride over and see if they found any stones to-day."

He lifted his reins, and the horses increased their speed, the sheriff's in a lope, while Patricia's mare struck a long, gliding pace, not awkward and swinging, but so smooth and straight and steady that it seemed to her as though the animal were on wheels. The gait was new to her and she looked at the sheriff in surprise.

"What a singular motion, Mr. Hartwell. I might as well be sitting in a car."

The sheriff laughed. "That mare's a natural pacer," said he. "They're mighty rare. She can keep that without breaking when Barney here is running his darnedest. I'll show you."

He spoke to Barney, and the horse shot suddenly ahead as if the bell had rung for the race.

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But after the first scurry Starlight was not distanced. Her slight motion became a sort of trepidation, a vibration, even and fine, and the wind sang in Patricia's ears. There seemed no need on her part of any effort of control or equilibrium. With no apparent exertion Starlight forged up abreast of the scampering Barney, and neck to neck kept pace with him, not trying to pass, but seeming to accept him as a pacemaker. This burst of speed lasted for perhaps three quarters of a mile across the firm though dusty turf, when the sheriff drew rein and they slowed into a normal speed.

The sheriff looked at Patricia with twinkling eyes, and for the first time saw actual animation in her face.

"It's wonderful!" said she. "I always thought a pace was like a trot held up to a certain speed, and after that a run."

"That's 'most always the case," said the sheriff, "but with the natural pacer it's the horse's fastest speed, as well as the slowest after a walk. That scarcely ever happens except in the case of wild mustangs, and when they've got it they've got most running horses beat. One of my old friends, a judge from Boston, visited me a few days last year. I put him on Starlight, and after we'd ridden a few miles he said, 'Confound it, Bob, this ain't going to do anything to my liver!' I said: 'Judge, when we

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ride out here we don't aim to exercise ourselves or the horse. We aim to get somewhere with as little work as possible.'" He laughed again. "I told him if he wanted to jog up his liver a few I'd put him on a pitcher. Do you want to swap, Miss Melton?"

"No," said Patricia, "I like this. It's new."

"Well," said the sheriff, "that's worth something. Take it from me, young lady, you can't always judge a country from the look of it through the window of a Pullman or riding in an automobile. There's generally a box of tricks somewhere. Now, Starlight is sort of like a high-powered eight-cylindered car. She can creep along dead slow or raise her speed without shifting her gears; but she wouldn't do for the East, where folks like to show how they can ride."

They crossed a great fenced meadow and came to a gate which the sheriff opened and closed behind them without dismounting.

"Could they jump it?" Patricia asked.

"I reckon so, but we've had enough excitement for one day. I've trained Starlight to jump wire, but it's a risky business." He shaded his eyes with his hand. "Here's my gang coming back. They knock off to do chores."

Far in the distance Patricia saw a small black object, followed by a trail of dust.

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"They go out in the flivver," explained the sheriff. "You see that little butte sticking up way over yonder? The diggings are on the edge of that. Let's head 'em off and see if they found anything."

They slightly altered their course, passed through another gate, and came out upon a narrow trail. As the car approached the sheriff raised his hand, and it came to a stop. There were five men in it, and Patricia noticed that they all took off their hats, and then after a first shy, curious look in her direction did not appear to see her.

"Any luck, boys?" said the sheriff.

"Just one little feller," answered the man at the wheel.

He reached in his pocket and handed the sheriff a diamond which, when cut, might have weighed two carats. The sheriff nodded and rode on.

"Not much of a day's work," said he to Patricia, "considering the cost of labor and cutting." He handed her the stone. "Keep that as a little souvenir," said he.

She thanked him, and the sheriff, watching her face, wondered at the sudden quiver that seemed to cross it, and the glow in her baffling eyes. He would have been a startled man could he have guessed that the sight of the rough little gem had suggested to her mind a great

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blue lambent piece of flawless carbon which gave from its wondrous depths a concentrated firmament of stellar flashes that even a darkened room could not subdue. For a moment she saw the Sultana, which for a brief period she thought she had stolen, only to find it a masterly imitation of this, in point of beauty, record gem.

They rode on in silence for a little way, then increased their pace, and came presently to the foot of the low butte, where the ground was scored tentatively with excavations.

"But don't you keep a guard here?" asked Patricia.

"No; as the proposition stands it would hardly be worth a man's while, taken as a gamble. Besides, they're sort of shy of me in these parts and I'd soon get onto it and somebody would have a heap of trouble. But there's wealth under our feet, Miss Melton, and if my scheme goes through I'll get to it one of these days. Let's ride up on the top of the butte and look round. It's right pretty about this hour, with the sun getting low. We might get down and cinch up, too, before starting back. When horses have been turned out a spell they bloat out when they're saddled up."

They made their way to the top of the butte, a diminutive plateau, where they dismounted, and the sheriff tightened girths. Patricia admitted the truth of his statement that the place

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at that hour was not without a sort of wild and desolate beauty. The sun was getting low, going down in fantastic swirls of lacy cloud. And the saffron-tinted air, still charged with impalpable dust, held marvelous effects of softened colors.

As far as the eye could reach swept the prairie, bounded like the ocean by the dim horizon and, like the sea after a gale, swelling in the foreground with irregular undulations which in the distance deceived the eye by a suggestion of motion. Its surface was brushed by a low note of mauve, but always with the prevailing tint of golden yellow; and the air was cool and fine and dry with a dryness that held a certain invigoration.

Patricia walked to the edge of the butte and stood staring out across. A dweller of the crowded places, she found something dreadful about its emptiness, the more so, perhaps, because it was not entirely empty. Far in the distance could be seen the tiny specks of the ranch houses, widely separate. She thought of the lives of such women as might be living in them, and how dreary these must be. The monotony of their poor surroundings, the same faces day in and day out, thoughts milling like a captive squirrel in its wheel, their only recreations such as were offered by the centers she had seen along the railroad—a station, a store,

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a few battered houses, possibly a motion picture once a week in a public hall or schoolhouse, tantalizing glimpses of an outer world, a remote world of life such as they might feel destined never to see in reality. A little shudder rippled through her. It seemed to Patricia that here was a prison in all but its confining walls, and prison was to her but one short step removed from death.

The sheriff, having tightened the girths, walked over to where she stood.

"Well, young lady," he asked, "what do you think of it from this point of view?"

Patricia shook her head. "I'd better not say," she answered. "It frightens me, and I'm not easily frightened."

"I'll allow you that. But what's so terrible about it?"

The sheriff stood for a moment with his feet a little apart, staring out across his domain. Patricia could only see his strong profile and so failed to get the expression of thoughtfulness in his face. He spoke without turning to her.

"Is that all it says to you?" he asked, and then, without waiting for her answer, went on in his even, vibrant voice. "There are two ways of looking at it, Miss Melton. I'd like to try to make you see it with my eyes, because I've studied it from both angles and I've proved the truth of each."

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"Very well," Patricia assented.

"Here's the first point of view: Productivity. Imagine this country, as far as you can see, green with crops, turning yellow as the season wears on, and bearing hundreds of thousands of bushels of food—strong material for food-stuffs to feed thousands of hungry mouths the world over, breadstuffs for famished men and women and children, big trainloads of yellow grain, hoisted into elevators and poured into big ships that take it to the four corners of the earth to bring back life and strength to starving humanity, to plump out the children and give the fathers and mothers fresh hope and a grip on things. Humanity has got to be fed.

"That's one way of looking at it; and here's the other: Think of these big prairies, first green like I just said, but with the green you see on the back of a dollar bill; then think of them turning yellow, but with the yellow of a gold piece. Imagine a sort of fluid money oozing up out of the ground to fill the stalks which smelt them down into the little yellow nuggets you find in a sheaf of wheat. Then imagine these winnowed out into a flow of molten gold that runs out of the big elevators in a steady stream, to be converted into real gold, through all the markets of the world. Fasten your mind on the idea of drawing out this fluid wealth from the very dirt that tormented you so yesterday

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and seeing it coined into the medium of exchange for almost everything that you and I and other people want. That's what some of us have been making it do, and for a while we have to pay the price in this lonesomeness and monotony that you complain of. None of us can expect to get a lot for nothing; honest or dishonest, there is a price to pay.

"Then look down at this patch of earth at your feet. In another year or two I figure to have a big hydraulic pump battering at the side of this heap of dirt and washing down the earth into sluices and sifters and straining out little pebbles like I gave you half an hour ago. There's great wealth right here under our feet, and a different kind of wealth out there as far as you can see. That part of it I've got pretty well developed, but this part I've got still to work out. But I need a partner."

He turned, and his eyes glowed at her eagerly.

"Maybe you can guess the sort of partner I mean. It's no longer a question of money with me. I can swing the money part of the show, but I need a partner to make it worth the work of getting it. I might quit now with all I could ever need for myself, and if I can't get the partner I want I might do that 'most any day. Until yesterday I had never found that partner, but she's here beside me now. The countess has told me something about the way you're fixed.

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Well, here's a partnership offered you. If you think it's good enough, Miss Melton, there's the offer."

Patricia turned slowly and stared at him. Then her smile whipped up with that lifting of the eyebrow which came when something touched her elfin whimsy.

"I've had some curious proposals, Mr. Hartwell," said she, "but never one as cleanly cut as this. If I were like other women, I'd accept. But I'm not, though I dislike having people tell me so. My motto has always been 'Freedom first'—and by 'freedom' I mean remaining the peculiar sort of person that I am. I could never give myself to any man, no matter what his charm or position or wealth. If I were to accept your offer I'd find myself in a few months' time—or it might be only a matter of days—a different individual. Perhaps I might be a better woman and a happier woman, but I could not possibly be the same woman. I might even find the soul which Léontine says I lack. But I have not the slightest desire to change my individuality." She looked at him and laughed. "You wouldn't want to yourself, would you?"

"Well, yes," said the sheriff, "if it looked like a good swap. I see what you mean. I reckon there'd be only one way to capture you."

Patricia gave him her veiled glance. "What?" she asked.

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"By force. The way strong men have taken their women since the world began."

Patricia nodded. "I fancy you're right," said she. "That would be the only way. But so far I've always been able to defend myself."

"Then my proposition is turned down?" asked the sheriff.

Patricia made him a little curtsy, and her mocking smile sent the blood rushing to his head. "You have done me great honor, Mr. Hartwell," said she. "I decline your offer with my most profound appreciation of it."

He stared at her for a moment with a lurid light in his eyes. "You're a wonder," said he. "You refuse what I propose, and you have the nerve to tell me in the same breath that force might get me what I wanted. Yet here we are, a powerful man and a soft, tender woman, miles away from anybody you could holler to for help, and giving me a dare; because that's about what it comes to, isn't it?" His blue eyes blazed at her, and he drew a step closer. "I don't know how to take you," said he, thickly. "Is it a dare, young lady, or is it just a bluff?"

Patricia gave a low, seductive laugh. "My dear man," said she, "it's precisely what you choose to take it. I never bluff."

"Then you mean to say," said the sheriff, in a stifled voice, "that you might give in to the man who could take you by force?"

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"Perhaps," murmured Patricia, and her rounded shoulders moved restlessly under the loose pongee shirt.

"Well, then," said the sheriff between his teeth, "I'll hold you in my arms for once if it's only to take your dare."

He stepped toward her, jaw grimly set, his eyes pouring out a blue flame. Patricia did not stir, but stood lightly poised, watching him intently. The sheriff's powerful hands went out to her, reached for her supple waist.

And then a strange, fantastic thing occurred. Patricia's left hand flashed out to fasten on his right wrist with a little slap. She swayed forward, and before the sheriff could realize what was happening his arm was thrust under and behind him, while Patricia, evading the clutch of his left hand, drove her elbow under the angle of his jaw. The sheriff found himself whirled about, thrown off his equilibrium, tottering. Patricia's right arm swept round his neck, gripped his right wrist, and, drawing this quickly upward, spun him in his tracks and threw him heavily upon his back. Bewildered, confused, unable to realize what had happened, something padded but vicious struck violently the angle of his jaw, still further numbing his faculties, and as he floundered there he heard a mocking laugh, and struggled up in time to see Patricia toss the hanging reins over the head of Starlight,

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mount, and, swinging the mare on its hind legs, plunge down over the steep slope of the butte.

Confused, astonished, and with a growing fury, the sheriff scrambled up, rushed to the pinto, and threw himself into the saddle. But he knew that he had lost the trick; Starlight was pacing out across the prairie at the top of her unusual gait. The sheriff, urging the pinto to its best speed, knew that he could scarcely hope to overtake the girl, who suddenly left the trail and headed straight across the prairie for the ranch house. But as it seemed to the sheriff she had mistaken the direction of the gate, and it was not until he saw her nearing the first wire fence that he realized her intention. He then remembered having told Patricia that Starlight had been trained to jump wire, and apparently the mare had learned her lesson well, for she cleared the barrier like a bird. Safely over, Patricia looked back and gave him a wave of the hand. Her mocking laugh reached him faintly. Then to his surprise she reined up and waited for his approach.

He came up slowly, face swarthy, eyes reddened, almost in tears of mortification. Within fifty yards Patricia hailed him.

"Will you be good now?" she cried. "Or must I ride back alone?"

"You win," answered the sheriff, grimly. "I'll sit tight."

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He rode up abreast, and they turned off together toward the nearest gate. The sheriff rode for a hundred yards in silence, then he gave his short, boyish laugh, and said: "I guess I understand better about that bull. My first idea must have been right. You're not a real girl; you must be a fairy, after all."

Patricia reined up suddenly, and the sheriff was startled at the expression of the face she turned to him. "Don't say anything like that," she warned, "or something worse might happen you."

"All right," agreed the sheriff. "I brought it on myself, but I've got a sort of hunch the hand isn't played out yet."

And they rode the rest of the way to the ranch in friendly conversation.

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Chapter VII

AN east wind had been blowing over the Mile High City and it made the people there a little restless. There seems to be something in an east wind the world over to disturb the human temperament. Topographical conditions do not appear to exert much influence on this. Even in England, where one might expect a strong draught from the east to bring a rush of dry air across the North Sea from the mainland, its effect is irritable to man and bird and beast and even to the fishes in the sea.

When the wind's in the east the fish bite least.
When the wind's in the west the fish bite best.
But when the wind is in the south it blows the bait in the fishes' mouth.

We face the east to pray, but perhaps that is because one faces the enemy to oppose him, and the east wind is a devil's wind. Even in Denver this seems to obtain. Cold, dry air comes down strong and sweet from where it has been sitting on the Rocky Mountains and, tempered

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by the glowing sun, it stimulates like wine. A man kisses his wife twice instead of once, while sweethearts scarcely know when to stop.

Juanita Heming was feeling the effect of the vexatious east wind, while her brother Jerry was still more irritated by it. He had left the sanatorium, not because he wanted to, nor because his cure was complete, but because he felt that he ought to do so.

When Nita protested, he growled: "Oh, confound it, sis, there are a lot more deserving cases than I am who've got no proper place to go! I feel about it just as if the ship had been torpedoed and there were a lot of helpless people who needed my seat in the boat. I don't think it's right for me to keep my berth there when we've got this perfectly good bungalow only a half a mile away. Chris felt the same about it and cleared out."

"Chris is cured, but I think perhaps you're right, Jerry."

"How does he like his new job over at the airdrome?"

"Oh, he likes it well enough, but I must say I hate to think of a man of his ability taking a position as sky-going chauffeur for the tourist crowd."

"Well, it's only temporary. Just as well for him to be sure of himself before going back to his job of electrical engineer. But the season

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will soon be over now. What's he going to do this winter?"

Nita looked a little distressed. "I don't know, Jerry. It's all my fault, I'm afraid. You see, I told him one day about Townley, and he immediately took it into his silly head that I needed a bodyguard."

Jerry stared at her for a moment with a frown. "Well, I don't know but what he's right, Nita. You really do, with that beast at large. The rewards I've offered don't seem to turn up anything. Not a sign of him since he took that shot at you and went out the window in the Hôtel des Colonists. But I can't see how he managed to get out of Paris."

"My theory is," said Nita, "that he ran down to the quay and slipped into the Seine and got aboard some barge that might have been towing down to Havre. Then he could have slipped aboard a ship or got a job as stoker or something. There were such a lot of loose casuals about that time."

Jerry nodded. "It's possible," he agreed. "But it makes it a little awkward about Chris."

"I know it, Jerry. He's giving up his proper work to be near me, whether I like it or not, and there doesn't seem any way in which I can square the obligation."

Her brother shot her a keen look. "Quite sure of that?" he asked.

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"Why, no," said Nita, frankly. "I'm awfully fond of Chris, but I don't think I'm in love with him, and I certainly don't intend to marry him until I am."

"You might do a lot worse, Nita."

"Of course I might; but it wouldn't be fair to Chris."

"I think he'd be quite willing to take the chance," said Jerry, dryly.

"That's not the point. I'm quite willing to take a chance on Townley. But Chris won't let me. Well, I don't want to let him take a chance on me. But, as you say, it's a perfectly impossible situation, and it can't go on indefinitely. Chris pretends that his cure is not complete and that he doesn't want to leave Denver until he's absolutely sure; but that's all rubbish. The doctors say he's sound as a dollar."

"He's sound as a million dollars," grumbled Jerry. "Hanged if I know what to do about it. I offered him a job as private secretary at four thousand dollars a year, and he laughed at me." He changed his position slightly, and Nita stooped and arranged the cushions behind him. She was occupied in making him comfortable when there came a brisk step in the hall below, and a cheerful voice called:

"Hello, Jerry. Can I come up?"

The permission was accorded, and Chris entered. The last six months had materially

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altered his aspect. He had gained in weight and lost the patches of suspicious color in his lean cheeks, while the excessive clearness of his skin had given way to a healthy, even tan. Deep breathing and a strict regime had removed the shortness of breath. He looked an athlete in the pink of condition; was, in fact, actually such. And he had tested his restored lung tissue by tennis and running.

Jerry surveyed the trim, well-dressed figure of his friend with an ironical smile.

"All dressed up and nowhere to go," said he. "Nita and I have just been discussing your case. We think you ought to be getting back on your job."

"I'm on it, old boy," said Chris.

"Then what do you call your job?"

"Sky piloting. Demonstrating the beauties of the Mile High City from another mile high. That beats burrowing underground."

"It may while it lasts," said Nita, "but it's nearly over now. You are ephemeral, my little boy. You are merely a form of summer insect life buzzing round in the sunshine, but the winter will soon be coming on and you had better be looking round for a hole in which to hibernate."

"No," said Chris, "your simile is wrong. I am more of a Northern fowl, and pretty soon I'll change into my white winter plumage."

"But look here, Chris," protested Jerry, "all

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idle persiflage aside, this sort of thing won't do. It's no use for you to stall. Nita and I know perfectly well why you're rotting round here, and it's getting on our nerves. If you're going to keep on playing bodyguard for my sister you can take your choice between accepting a paid position as such or getting fired. Do I make myself clear?"

"Not your fault if you don't, old top," said Chris, cheerfully. "But I think you'd better lay off me. If I were to go back, knowing that Nita was in danger of getting scragged some day by this slimy beast, I'd soon worry myself back into T. B. again."

"You're a persistent beggar, Chris," growled Jerry. "What's the use of it, anyway? You can't shadow Nita all day and sleep on a mat outside her door at night. If anything should happen it wouldn't be when she was walking arm in arm with you."

"Well, that's not altogether the point," Chris answered, with his customary cheer. "I've got a sort of hunch that Nita might feel any impending danger, and I want to be somewhere round and get between it and her. What difference does it make, anyhow? I've got no obligations or responsibilities, and if I like it why should you worry?"

"What are you going to do this winter?" Nita asked.

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Chris looked at her with a grin. "I'll tell you when the winter comes," he answered. "Just now I'd rather take you for a spin if Jerry will give you leave of absence for a couple of hours."

"All right," Nita agreed. "Jerry ought to take a nap, and I'd rather like a blow."

She dressed herself for a flight, then went out with Chris, and they walked over to the hangar, about a quarter of a mile away.

Nita had often been up with him, sometimes for flights of two or three hours, and was in fact the institution's best client, flying as a pastime not yet having fallen within the scope even of individuals of average means. It does not take long to cover a mile in a plane of medium speed, and at a tariff of a dollar a mile, coming and going, the passenger dispenses, as one might say, a steady stream of dollars for the pastime. Nita had seriously considered the purchase of a plane of her own, but Chris strongly opposed this measure.

"The next thing, you'd be wanting to pilot, yourself," said he, "and, though the sport is safe enough in the hands of one who understands it thoroughly, it is not yet precisely what I call a lady's game. Better keep on hiring 'em a while longer. The cost doesn't matter, with your oil wells down there spouting money faster than you can possibly spend it. Nothing like having your fortune in liquid form."

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The two were gradually approaching an intimacy that was not brotherly and sisterly, nor yet quite a sentimental one. It was comradely so far, but with an underlying quality of combustible energy that needed but a spark of living flame to produce an explosive union with the production of a new and stable compound. Lacking this spark, it might have remained definitely inert like powder in a magazine, or even, if ignited under no restraining pressure, have burned itself destructively away like cordite unconfined.

Such a relationship is not uncommon between a man and a woman of self-contained natures. Given a certain routine of life and uneventful surroundings, there may exist a sort of insulation, like two electric wires carrying each its strong current, led side by side, but neither producing a reaction in the other.

No doubt such a condition exists often between two persons of opposite sex and strong mutual sympathy, to develop what is described as a platonic friendship. Such lives might never reach fruition where nothing occurs to complete the circuit between them. It was rather like this with Chris and Nita. Both were insulated by their nonconductors; that of Chris, the conviction that he had not enough to offer Nita in exchange for herself, while Nita's ardent nature was embedded in the confining coat of terrific experiences which had made it difficult, almost impos-

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sible, for her to react to any powerful emotion without the agency of some tremendous impulse.

Under such circumstances as these it is possible that their relations might have continued indefinitely on a purely individual basis. Most young men desperately in love have realized the hopelessness of such a situation and longed for some fortuitous event to break down the barrier; a shipwreck, a fire, an opportunity for the defense of the loved one at the risk of any personal catastrophe. It was so with Chris. He realized fully that Nita was not a woman to be wooed and won in a prosaic way, by mere devotion or sentimental speeches. Her emotions were strongly contained, impervious to the reactions that might have stirred those of young girls whose lives had been monotonous or sheltered. She was familiar with the rush of violent impulses, both dangerous and passionate, the blasts of the wind of circumstance. But these were far removed, leaving her moored, as it were, in sheltered waters, there to await the next stress to which her destiny might urge her.

They reached the hangar, where Chris ordered his plane wheeled out, and they got aboard to make a short flight over and about the city. But even such diversion, thrilling to most, and with its elements of danger and exhilaration, failed to evoke in Nita any particular excitement. Chris longed to fly with her to some

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desert island or be forced to descend in some recess of the mountains where adventure might lurk. He was constantly aware of being very close to Nita, while infinitely removed from her, like the electric wires already mentioned, which, side by side, might yet be carrying their messages to the antipodes.

When finally they returned to the hangar and started to walk back to the bungalow, he tried to express something of this.

"Sometimes I feel about you as if you were the gold piled up inside the paying teller's window, Nita," said he. "Awfully close, but not for me. You might be the moon, for all that I'm concerned. I get your light, but with no warmth in it."

"Sometimes I feel like the moon, Chris. A burned-out planet, shining with the reflected light from very far away."

"No, you're a sort of Sleeping Beauty. If only I could discover the magic to wake you up! Do you think that anybody else has got it?"

Nita shook her head. "Not now," she answered. "But you mustn't let it trouble you, my dear. I can't go on forever in this uninspired state. It's the result of recent experiences and anxiety about Jerry, and probably a sort of relaxation that comes from the sudden freedom of care over material things."

Chris looked at her speculatively. "I won-

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der if it would do any good if I were to bang you on the head and drag you to a cave."

"Not a bit. I'd wake up with a headache, feeling very cross and complaining about the discomfort of the cave. I should probably tell you that you were no gentleman."

"Well, then, what if I should keep somebody else from banging you on the head and dragging you to the cave?"

"That might help a little. Most women like to be fought for. But it would have to be some scrap."

"The trouble is," said Chris, "that nowadays most men do the fighting for the females of their kind in their business offices. I'm rotten poor at that sort of tournament, and, besides, it wouldn't get me anywhere, as you're so hopelessly rich already."

"You might try, though," said Nita; "the fight's worth something."

Chris shot her an eager look, then his face set rigidly.

"Gad! I believe I'll do it," said he. "After all, there's not much else I've got to offer."

"Do you really mean it, Chris?"

"Yes, I do; otherwise I might stick round forever or until some fellow with more pep came along and grabbed you off. I'm beginning to think that you're in no great danger. If that brute really meant to get you he'd have had a

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try by this time. Besides, revenge like that scarcely ever happens. A man might cherish hatred for a woman that had loved him, or a pal that had double-crossed him, but not against a person who had tried to get him from the very start, and for a perfectly good reason."

"Well, I hope you're right, Chris. No doubt you are, but this was an unusual case. Townley really thought I had fallen victim to his fascinations. I don't believe he knows to-day the reason why I trapped him. No doubt he thinks I did it because I was in love with Calvert Steele."

"Well, that would have been a perfectly good reason. At any rate, I've come to believe that you're in no danger from him, so I am going to tender my resignation."

"And go away?"

"Yes. To follow your suggestion and do something with my life and get something more to offer you."

Nita was silent for a moment. She was trying to imagine just what it would be like to go on as she had been doing, but without Chris, and in this she was partly successful. For death is often the supreme test of one's state of heart, and separation for an unfixed period of time is practically a phase of death.

"*Partir—c'est mourir un peu,*" she hummed to herself.

"Yes," he agreed. "Tosti's song expresses it.

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Parting—it is to die a little. It might even run into the same thing, but I'd rather risk it than go on this way, because now I die daily when I say good night."

"Where do you intend to go?" asked Nita.

"Back to the East, to talk to an uncle. He's got mines in Peru. He'd offered me a good job there, but the doctor said it was too hot and damp. You see the mines are down in a river valley."

Nita looked distressed. "But I don't want you to go to such a place as that, Chris. It might start things up again."

"If there's anything that can be started up I want to know it before I talk much more to you," Chris answered.

"I believe you really love me, Chris."

"Thanks. So do I. It's true, though. If it were myself I loved I'd stick on round here and be with you whenever I got the chance, and one of these days you'd up and marry me just because there didn't seem any particular reason for not doing so. I don't want you that way, Nita. I'd rather go without you altogether. If you ever marry me it's got to be because you can't possibly do without me."

Nita appeared to turn this in her mind. "It would be rather silly if I should come to that conclusion just when you got all settled in Peru," said she.

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"Well, I want to test that heat test, anyway, for about six months," said Chris, "so there'd be no loss of time. It's not a new idea. I've been turning it in mind without the nerve to make the break, but what Jerry said awhile ago tipped the scale. He's right. I'm a nuisance to you rotting round this way. Your danger's not enough to warrant it. I'll send you an Airedale or something to take my place. You can pat him on the head and pretend it is I."

Nita's face was very dubious as she listened to these staccato remarks. Chris was proposing to do precisely what she would have wished him to, and yet now the thought of his near departure struck her through with a pang of dismay. She had made a good many friends in Denver, and liked the place, but the awful doubt struck through her now as to how much she were going to like it without Chris. He was, like herself, a good deal of a cosmopolitan, and they had much in common, not only in experience, but point of view. Their natures were, in fact, rather similar, but with this tremendous advantage, that their ups and downs struck intervals, so that the things that annoyed Nita were taken lightly by Chris, and *vice versa*.

They had the rare faculty of keeping each other in cheerful spirits, and they laughed a good deal when together. Nita realized suddenly that she was going to miss Chris tremen-

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dously and she wondered if really she were not acting foolishly to let him go.

"When do you expect to leave?" she asked.

"As soon as we close up shop at the hangar. That may be almost any day."

"Well," said Nita, "it might still do with a little thinking over. Peru is an awfully long way off."

Her hand, as if swaying carelessly at her side, touched that of Chris, which immediately inclosed it. And thus in silence, but each conscious of a sense of impending loss, they reached the bungalow, where they loosed hands and stood rather miserably, unwilling to part. It was one of those critical moments that needed but a spark to ignite the mixture of volatile essence that emanated from each, and this spark was even then proceeding in their direction like a meteor, but leaving a trail of dust that was not of the same luminous quality as that of the stellar fragment.

But this was still at a considerable distance, and as they stood there, reluctant to separate, yet with no apparent reason for not doing so, they heard the bell of the telephone, which was in the living room, and the butler came out.

"Mrs. de Forest is calling, mademoiselle," said he.

"Wait a minute, Chris," said Nita.

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Chapter VIII

AFTER the sheriff had sped his parting guests with the assurance that he would probably overtake them on the road to Denver, he went into the house and, flinging himself into a big chair, was plunged immediately in profound reflection. His infatuation for Patricia was of a cyclonic character, and now, as he seated himself, he wondered if he were ever going to be content to live on there as before. He did not deceive himself as to the nature of his passion. It was not love as he had ever conjured this sentiment in his mind; nor was it, as he felt thoroughly convinced, of a base, unworthy character. He desired Patricia as he could not have believed it possible that any man had ever desired a woman. But he wanted her for always, for infinity.

This strong man was conscious of a cosmic difference between them, not only a lack of sympathy of thought and instincts, but a spiritual disparity. He was fully aware of a gulf between their natures, a deep abyss of which the depths were hidden from his understanding.

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She seemed to him like the puma which he had dominated, a creature of alien race, beautiful, vitalized with hidden fires inconceivably charged with hostile impulses, yet tamable were the opportunity to offer.

He put her on no pedestal of either social or moral superiority. The former he ignored with the frank American disregard for class distinction. Knowing himself to be of good Colonial stock, well, if self, educated, well read, a gentleman in every honorable instinct, clean souled, and very rich, he would not have admitted it presumptuous on his part to aspire to any woman. He fully believed what Léontine had told him of Patricia's intolerance of love. The sheriff saw her rather in the light of an unsailed sea, primeval forest, or scornful snow peak, of heights inviolate; and no doubt she might hold for the explorer dangers similar to these. The attempted conquest of her would be fraught with elemental perils, but the blood of pioneer explorers flowed through the sheriff's veins, and he was not dismayed. He meant to try again and yet again in different settings, where the desolation of a prairie which had so repelled her would not weigh against him, and where she might see in him not merely the rough-clad, successful rancher, but a strong man in a bigger world, and in contrast with other men who were less strong and less dominating.

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It had been his plan to give them a couple of hours' start rather than trail along in their dust at a pace that irked him, for his car was a big, high-powered one. But he had not sat long in meditation upon the strange, alien, almost eerie, type of the girl who had dropped into his world like a visitant from some other planet, when the Chinaman came to him, smiling softly, and gently rubbing together the palms of his hands.

"Well, what is it, Charley?"

The beady eyes of the Chinaman twinkled at him merrily.

"Mis' Hartwell!"

"Well, shoot."

"Him piecy girl velly bad."

The sheriff eyed him in astonished anger. "What's that?"

"Him piecy girl allee same bad lot."

The sheriff roused up in his chair and glared in amazement, his blue eyes round and wide.

"Why, drat your yellow hide! What are you trying to say?"

The Chinaman bobbed his head. "They all bad. Piecy girl want kill you along road—steal 'em diamonds. Charley listen talky-talk. Men he like. Big lady she no like; say no can do."

The sheriff stared at him wildly, then burst into a laugh.

"Well, of all the locoed slant-eyed Chinks I

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ever saw—" he began, then paused. "Go on —go on, Charley. What else did you dream? Never knew you hit the pipe."

The Chinaman's eyes twinkled. "No pipe dleam, sar. When you go along office—all talky-talk. Me kleep up top side." He made a little gesture toward the ceiling, which separated the room from the low attic. "They talk Flench—me talk Flench plenty—me Tongkin man—Flench China—one time cook lestaulant along Saigon. One time, two years mess boy on Messageries ship—know Flench allee same English."

"Well, that ain't saying much," snapped the sheriff, but his face began to harden. "What did you think you heard them say?"

"No t'ink. Allee samee know. Me listen top side longside. Miss Melton she say: 'Suppose we stop on road? Sheliff he come along stop. We shoot 'im up plenty, takey bag diamonds. Evelybody t'ink holdups get 'em.' Big lady she say: 'No good. Policeman find out we klooks.' 'Sides, she no likum killin's—"

The sheriff sprang to his feet, eyes glaring, face lurid. But beneath his rage and utter amazement was a rising suspicion. He was well versed in criminology and knew that beneath exteriors the most smooth and polished there might lurk often the most sinister natures. Incredible as was this information, he could not

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believe that the Chinaman was giving it without good reason.

"All right," said he, harshly. "Put my stuff aboard the car. I'll go now."

"Light away, sheliff," said the Chinaman. and padded out.

The sheriff stood for a moment with a somber face, scowling at the floor. He roused himself abruptly, strode into his office, took out the bag of diamonds, and tossed them on the table of the living room. Then stepping to his desk, he took from a drawer two pairs of handcuffs and two automatic pistols, which he pocketed.

Then, as he stood there with a darkened face, his eyes fell upon a length of steel chain hanging from a nail. It was such a chain as might have been required to hold a great Dane or mastiff plunging at its kennel. But it was longer—two such dog chains joined by a shackle—with a brass padlock at one end, and two feet of it was scored and polished and gleaming from the furious contact of the puma's teeth, where this animal in rage and despair had vainly mouthed it.

The sheriff's face grew even more grim. He stepped to the wall, took down the chain, let it fall into his palm, a jingling, gleaming heap, then thrust it into his pocket.

Ten minutes later the big roadster was leaving a yellow streak over the still prairie, and in

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half an hour the sheriff drew up at the railroad station. He leaped down and went inside.

"Hello, Bob!" said the station agent. "What's up?"

"I want to get a wire right off to New York, Eddie," said the sheriff. "Suppose you let me rap it out myself."

"Sure," said the agent, and, taking the hint, strolled out upon the platform.

The sheriff seated himself at the keyboard, and sent a long detailed message to police headquarters, New York, requesting that the answer be wired without delay. He then set himself to wait. An hour passed. A big through train stopped for water, and as he strolled up and down the platform the sheriff glanced without emotion at several pretty Pullman girls who descended to stretch their silk-stockinged limbs. The train rumbled off, and presently the ticket agent called him through his open window.

"Here's your answer, Bob."

"All right, Eddie." He hurried to the keyboard, and received the following:

Three of parties referred to dangerous international crooks. Have not sufficient grounds for their arrest. Know nothing of Sir Harold Trimble. Probably crook also. Advise you keep them under observation and warn police of Denver and Slope.

The sheriff said good-by to the agent, got

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into his car, and as he sped westward his face was bleak; but there was a hot, slumberous glow in his blue-black eyes. The deep, strong nature of the man had never been in such a state of furious revolt. He had combated a fickle and, as it sometimes seemed, a treacherous nature, and many savage and treacherous men. He had often felt that there were arrayed against him in his efforts to wrench its yield from the face of the earth a horde of hostile powers of darkness, while men in whom he had trusted proved themselves cheats and liars. Frankly avowed lawbreakers, whom at times his official duties required him to suppress, had seemed honest in comparison with these last.

But in his struggles for more than a mere existence his inner emotions had never been involved. He had accepted the vagaries of climate or the curse of insect pests in the pioneer spirit, and the tricksters who had sought vainly so far to profit by his reverses, as a species of human coyote whom to trust too far was a mistake of inexperience, and the results were to be accepted as such. The sheriff's whole attitude toward the ups and downs of his past life had been governed by the pioneer spirit and had brought him no rancor.

But here it was different. He had sheltered strangers in a hospitality as broad as the region in which he lived, and in one of these he had

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found, as he thought, the woman for whom he had waited so long; and while fatuously studying the problem of how to achieve the possession of her the core of his desire had been proved, not rotten, but poisonous. His revolt was now directed less against Patricia than against a society that could make such a thing possible.

For he was in a state of revolt, not revulsion. He found, to his amazement, that, despite what he had learned, his sentiment toward Patricia had undergone no change. He still desired her as much as ever. It was rather as though the puma, after being fed by hand and permitting tentatives of friendliness, had, when his back was turned, been possessed of an impulse to launch herself upon him and bury her fangs in his jugular. As he drove along he began to understand the cosmic difference which he had felt between this strange girl and himself. She was of other clay, alien soul, ruthless and sanguinary impulses and nature. Like the puma, she would not permit the touch of a caressing hand, his or any other man's, and, like the puma, she must be trapped before the process of subjugation began.

If the sheriff had fallen in love with Patricia it is probable that his discovery of her criminality would have reacted entirely otherwise. As it was, he could think of her only as a creature to be dominated and subdued. Her ruthless

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suggestion that he be murdered on the road rather maddened than disgusted him. He thought of her cool, mocking courage and superhuman strength, when charged by the bull, and of the trick she had played him on the top of the butte. This had amused rather than shamed him. He looked at his powerful wrists resting on the rim of the wheel, and chuckled inwardly. "Some girl!" he breathed, and said to himself that here was apparently such a case as he had read of in his library of crime, where the normal obliquity was specified to a sort of feral, sanguinary impulse and limited to that. Patricia did not seem to him wicked in the way of most of her sex. He did not believe that she was either vicious or depraved, but rather in the nature of the puma or she-wolf. But at the thought of her male colleagues his face grew set and grim. As for Léontine, she was probably a woman who had been led to crime through the agency of some man and had formed the habit of it as the result of circumstances.

Before he had gone many miles the sheriff had his emotions well in hand, and as he approached the Mile High City and saw ahead a gradually thickening cloud of dust his future course of actions was well established. He decided not to warn the local authorities immediately, but to keep the dangerous quartet under his eye

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during their sojourn in Denver, and on their departure to warn them that their identity was known and that they had better mind their step. It did not enter his mind to set a trap for them. They had tricked and might have killed him, but for the veto of Léontine, and the sheriff was sportsman enough to be a little amused at his own simplicity.

He rapidly overhauled the car ahead. The road was now excellent, and he stole up so silently that his presence was not discovered until he forged abreast.

"Well, folks," said he, genially, "you made a good run of it."

Léontine gave him a little wave of her hand and he thought he saw Patricia's elfin smile behind her veil.

"Come and see us at our hotel," said Léontine. "We shall probably be there for two or three days. We want you to dine with us."

The sheriff bowed his acknowledgments and, there being no reason to linger, he swept on past.

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Chapter IX

AMONG the new friends Nita had made in Denver was a rich and charming widow with a propensity for doing good in a Lady Bountiful way, from which she extracted a great deal of interest and pleasure while diffusing practical assistance. This lady, Mrs. de Forest, had taken a great liking to Nita and found much to attract her in Chris, whom she had met at Nita's house. She was fond of entertaining, particularly people who were interesting, and had established a sort of salon. She had conceived this idea from winters spent in Paris, where through friends in the American colony she had made French acquaintances, and, being a clever woman, was quick to see the advantages of the French social idea in bringing together under her roof not merely the rich and fashionable, but the great or near-great people in the public eye, whether professional, political, artistic, or scientific.

Chris was waiting with his usual cheerful patience when Nita came out and looked at him with a smile.

"We are roped in for the charity ball," said

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she. "I bought some tickets the other day, but declined to assist personally because I don't feel much in the spirit for a spree. The last ball I went to was in Paris, and it rather put me off such parties."

"Why the change of heart?" asked Chris.

"Well, Mrs. de Forest has been very kind and she's a patroness and insists on having me for decorative purposes."

"Mrs. de Forest is right," said Chris. "But did I understand you to say we?"

"You did. She wants you, too; and I've got to have an escort, so it might as well be you. She wants me to wear my most spectacular gown and all my jewels, and contribute generally to the size of the splash. The Mile High City is sending a delegation or commission or something to represent it in the food distribution for Armenia, and there are to be some tableaux and other high jinks."

"That sounds amusing," said Chris, "but it's rather short notice, isn't it?"

"Oh, I've got a trunkful of joy clothes that have never been unpacked, and a lot of gewgaws that are in safe deposit, so I can manage somehow. Let's go in to town for tea."

Chris readily agreed to this. The car was summoned, and a few moments later they were rolling over the broad plateau.

"Haven't danced since I graduated from the

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sanatorium," said Chris. "It will be a good test for my wind. I'd thought a little of putting it to the proof by taking up my favorite sport again."

"Mountain climbing?"

"Yes. I never missed a season at Chamonix in the five years I lived in Europe. It came in mighty handy when I was with the Alpini. Then that bullet in the leg made me distrust it for rock work, so I took up flying. But it's all right now. Every time I look at that heap of Rockies over there it makes me restless."

"Doesn't flying take the place of it?"

"No; that's different. Of course you get the height, and then some. But, you see, in flying you put your faith a lot in the artisans who made your plane, while in rock climbing you have to put it entirely in the Great Artisan that made yourself. Aside from that it's all up to you. I don't think I've ever had quite the same sensation as that I've got on overcoming a dangerous Alp and feeling the crest of it under my feet. It's a personal triumph instead of a mechanical one." He turned and looked at her with a whimsical smile, which had a wistful accent on it. "It seems to me there could be only one thrill of exaltation greater than that of conquering an inaccessible peak."

"You needn't say it," said Nita. "Besides, I don't believe it."

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"It's true, though," he answered. "It would carry one to greater heights."

"I think you'd better put both out of your head for the time being. Imagine a man complaining about the tameness of flying!"

"Well, it is a little tame after going up to pepper and be peppered at."

"You'd better tell some of the men on the hangar to get their rifles and take a few shots at you just for old time's sake."

"'Fraid these Western boys might be better shots than Heinie."

They quickly covered the five miles to town and entered the broad streets of the Mile High City. Most of the tourist traffic was over for the season, but there was, as usual, plenty of activity. As they drew up in front of the hotel a touring car just ahead of them was discharging its passengers.

Nita leaned forward, looked intently at a girl who was getting out, then said to Chris: "I know that girl. I met her once in London, and afterward in Paris, the second year of the war. Her name is Patricia Melton, and she was serving as publicity agent and propagandist for the French."

As she spoke, the girl in question turned, and Chris was struck by the peculiar elfin beauty of her face. The long eyes, which, though of similar amber color to Juanita's, were quite dif-

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ferent in being of a lighter and yellower tone, flashed with a gleam of recognition, and the left eyebrow slightly raised at the outer corner. Then she turned away and spoke to the man driving, apparently a gentleman. He glanced back over his shoulder, and Chris saw the profile of a handsome face with a thick brown mustache and Vandyke. Then, his passengers having dismounted, the car moved ahead, to be replaced by their own. The girl seemed to linger and said something to her companions, a beautifully shaped woman of early middle age, and a tall man of distinguished foreign appearance.

Nita opened the door and stepped out, Chris following her. They overtook the others as they paused to let pass some people coming out of the hotel.

"How do you do, Miss Melton?" said Nita. "Don't you remember me?"

The girl's wide smile whipped back, and she held out her hand.

"Of course I do, Miss Heming! The last time we met was at Mrs. Givens's in Paris, at dinner. Don't you remember how we finished the evening in the cellar?"

"Of course. Fancy seeing you in Denver!"

Patricia presented Léontine and Stephan, Nita introducing Chris. Nita, whose only knowledge of Patricia was that of a very inter-

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esting girl, engaged in her work as an Allied propagandist whom she had met at two exclusive houses, was naturally pleased at the encounter, while finding her now with two Europeans of distinguished appearance, Russians, as she correctly guessed them to be, gave to Patricia an added *cachet.*

"I've become a resident of Denver," said Nita. "My brother, Captain Heming, started a tubercular process in his lungs after the war, and I've had him in a sanatorium until quite recently. Captain Carmichael had a spot, too, but they've discharged him, cured. Are you touring? We're just going in for tea. Won't you join us?"

The invitation was accepted, and they were shown to a table in a dining room well filled despite the lateness of the season. After a few moments of conversation Patricia told them of the accident to the car shortly before reaching Denver, and the hospitality shown them. Chris laughed.

"You played in luck," said he. "Bob Hartwell does himself and his guests mighty well. He's the typical big-hearted, big-fisted Westerner. Everybody knows Bob and respects him. He'd be one of the important men out here if he cared to bother with it."

Léontine, in her charming, cultivated voice, described their tour across the continent. "You

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must know, Miss Heming," said she, "that we are now soldiers of fortune."

Her quick wit at once appreciated the fact that, since Chris knew the sheriff and, as the sheriff had followed them to Denver, the two were very apt to meet, they must stick to their story of being war victims who had conceived the idea of finding occupation with the moving pictures; wherefore, in her fascinating way, she explained their plans, to which Nita and Chris listened sympathetically.

"Well," said Nita, "I don't see any reason why you shouldn't make a success of it."

"Nor I," said Chris. "Everybody's doing it nowadays that can do it. I only got a glimpse of Sir Harold, but if he can ride and shoot and swim he ought to make good."

Patricia's limpid voice took up the conversation. "He's going on to Salt Lake by train to-night," said she; "but we shall probably stop a day or two in Denver."

"Then you must let me show you about a little," said Nita. "There is to be a ball here to-morrow night. I'll send you cards."

Somebody tapped her on the shoulder in passing. It was Mrs. de Forest, whom Nita pressed to join the party. Chris, rather fascinated by the unusual type of Patricia's beauty, wondered at the singular lack of expression in features so mobile, when from time to time her eyes rested

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on Nita. If thoughts had been as palpable as theosophists would lead us to believe, he might have got some inkling as to the doubts and fears projected from the mind of this baffling and beautiful archcriminal. For Patricia was puzzling her brain to account for the terrible expression that had flashed across Sir Harold's face when she had spoken to him after his backward glance through the glass of Nita's car, and the meaning of his muttered words, "I must keep out of this." And Patricia's subtle brain was beginning to guess at the truth. If her suspicion was correct, she wondered how far their joint influence might go in keeping Howard's vengeful passion within safe control.

The tea party broke up presently, Nita and Chris driving back to the bungalow.

"What do you think of those people, Chris?" Nita asked.

He shrugged his broad shoulders. "The women are pretty, though there is something about the girl that rather puts me off: gives me a sort of dog-and-cat feeling, as if I'd like to take her in my jaws and shake her and feel her crumple up."

"She doesn't look as if she'd crumple very easily."

"No more do some cats. Once in a while the dog gets the worst of it. I like Madame de

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Vaux, though. Her brother looks a tin-horn gambler."

"He struck me rather that way, but they must have had a pretty hard time of it in Russia, and she has all the marks of a *femme du monde*. I've heard something about her war work. She was right in the thick of things. The girl is fascinating."

"I'll admit that," said Chris. "She's not the vamp sort, though, but she's got an inhuman quality about her which might be attractive to some men, but works the other way on me. Still, they seem well bred and they're interesting; and I must say I admire their pluck in bucking the movie game. They ought to succeed, I should say. Are you going to invite them to the house?"

"Yes. Why not? I've met her, properly introduced, and one ought to observe the customs of the country in the matter of hospitality. It's rather nice to meet Europeans again when one's lived over there as long as I have."

"Tell me, Nita," said Chris, suddenly, "do you ever get nervously depressed?"

"I used to when I first came here. They tell me that it's not unusual—the dryness or altitude or something?"

"I don't think it's the altitude. I'm accustomed to being a mile or so high, but for these last three days I've scarcely been able to sit

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still, let alone sleep. Had a sense of impending ill. It got me so badly just now while I was sitting at the tea table talking to those people that if I hadn't been with you I'd have jumped up and beat it."

"But they seemed to be very nice people, Chris, and you like pretty women."

"Not that sort. I'll admit they're pretty, but there's something about them that got on my nerves, like snakes or witches in disguise or poisonous orchids or something of the sort. I seemed to feel the presence of forces that were malevolent for you."

Nita laid her hand on the back of his. "That's because you've decided to go away, Chris," said she. "You feel that, once your protective influence is removed, all the bogies are going to come crowding in. To tell the honest truth I feel a little bit that way myself. Perhaps I may not let you go, after all."

A wave of color that was in no way hectic swept over Chris's face. His hand turned and clasped Nita's, and so, holding hands for the second time that day, and scarcely speaking, they presently arrived at the bungalow.

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Chapter X

A CONSULTATION on ways and means was in progress in the rooms of the quartet of social parasites. The three had found Townley waiting for them with a grim face and pale eyes in which gleamed a murderous light.

"That's the woman that just missed sending me to the guillotine and has now made the world unsafe for me to live in," said he. "What's her name? Who is she?"

Léontine turned upon him in a threatening way. "Listen, my friend," said she, coldly. "I saved your life in Paris and made it possible for you to get over here. If you are fool enough to let your desire for revenge endanger us now, you need count on no more protection from us."

Townley's eyes fell before her dark blazing ones. "You needn't be afraid of my taking any chances," said he.

"You had better not!" Léontine's voice was such as she had not employed since the days of her active function as one of Ivan's principals, when, next to the chief and Chu-Chu, she had been the most feared in the wide ramifications of their organizations. "The trouble with you,

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Townley," she went on, "is lack of the training which furnished the rest of us with the finesse to keep our liberty. In Ivan's school of crime we were taught to disregard personal revenge —to keep out of it just as we kept out of any active participation in the actual doing of the job. We were the minds, and they directed other hands than ours. A personal danger to any one of us was only regarded when it became a common danger to the band. In that case there were those detailed to remove it."

"But Chu-Chu?" Townley interrupted.

"When Chu-Chu killed, it was in a manner not to implicate any of the rest of us. We were not involved. With you it is different. Any attempt you might make for personal vengeance is bound to inculpate us all. So you had better decide what you propose to do. Unless you swear to take no action we shall part right here and now."

"Besides," muttered Stephan, "what good would it do? We cannot live on revenge. We must have some money, and very soon."

Patricia's limpid voice contrasted strangely with the tense ones of the others. "That girl has come into a fortune since I last saw her. She was hard up then. I suspected her of being a spy of the British. To-day we meet her with the costliest car to be had and a sable coat and a wonderful rope of pearls. She tells us she has

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a little bungalow out on the plateau. Her name is Juanita Heming."

Townley sprang to his feet, eyes lurid, tanned face, where not covered by his beard, a congested purple. So frightful was his appearance that even his three companions, accustomed as they were to raw and criminal passions, far worse than primitive ones, eyed him with a sort of watchful reflection of his own.

"Juanita Heming!" Townley snarled. And then at Léontine's warning glance he lowered his voice and changed his diction into French.

"But Heming was the name of that American officer who was one of the four heirs whom my act made millionaires. He was the man suspected until this girl tricked me into betraying myself. So that is the source of her wealth." And he used a name that cannot be translated.

In the moment of tense stillness which followed Patricia gave her liquid, mocking laugh. "*Ma foi*, but you are right!" said she. "You told us that this fortune was in oil lands, and no doubt they have been boring wells ever since. This is, of course, the sister. She told us that she had brought her brother, Gerald Heming, here because he was tuberculous."

Stephan blew a cloud of cigarette smoke at the ceiling. "*Sapristi!* But they owe you a lot, *mon vieux*. Still, I do not see just how you are going to collect."

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Patricia leaned forward, rested her bare, round elbows on the table, and dropped her chin on her folded hands. Her expression was that of a sea nymph in a reverie, a siren gazing out at the wide horizon through veiled eyes, wondering, perhaps, when the wind of circumstance might waft the next mariner within the orbit of her lure.

"Léontine is not going to approve," said she, "but we have reached a point where it is no longer possible to stick to her trained technic. You must remember, my dear"—she turned to Léontine, and her wide smile flickered up at one corner—"we have no longer any skilled craftsmen to accomplish what our minds and social entrée make possible. We have no one but ourselves to depend upon and, as Stephan says, we are in an impasse—a cul-de-sac. We must have money, and very soon."

"*Ma foi*, but she is right!" growled Stephan.

"It seems to me," Patricia continued, "that fortune has thrown a prize in our path. We know that this Heming girl has wonderful pearls, and no doubt they are not her only jewels, but we shall know more of that after this ball that she spoke of. She tells us that she lives out in a bungalow in a half-built section on the outskirts of the town."

Léontine stared at her with a frown. "*Eh, bien?*"

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Patricia threw out her hands with a deprecating gesture. "Of course, my dear, I know that it has been a matter of strict technic with you never to take any active part in a crime, and our last miserable failure, when Clamp, the peddler, so outfinessed us, proved you to be right. If we had not stuck to your principles we should not be here now. But you must remember that then we had a reserve to fall back upon; also that we did not know ourselves to be playing the game against two of the most astute minds in this country, Clamp and Rosenthal. Besides, we have no longer our skilled operatives."

"That is true," said Stephan; "we are at the end of our string and we have nobody to depend upon but ourselves."

Patricia paid no attention to this interruption. "I do not want to boast," said she, "but I have always worked successfully alone until I went against Clamp. But this does not seem to me a very difficult job. Stephan, Howard, and myself ought to be able to manage it easily. You, Léontine, need not take any active part in it at all. You are simply to play your role as you have always done, and consider us the operatives."

Léontine shook her head. "I don't like it," said she, "and I don't trust Howard if he gets within striking distance of this girl."

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Townley shrugged. "Don't let that bother you, Léontine," said he. "I'll play the game as Patricia frames it up. My own little private score can wait."

"If I could be certain of that," said Léontine, reluctantly—"but I have always been opposed to bloodshed, and since the war I hate it worse than ever."

"Nobody need get hurt," said Patricia, smoothly.

"Have you any plans?" Stephan asked.

"Nothing definite as yet. It would be a simple burglary. Léontine should be somewhere in evidence when it occurs, and we must manage in some way to do the job quickly and rejoin her. You probably heard Mrs. de Forest asking the Heming girl to wear her prettiest gown and jewels, as they want to make the affair as brilliant as possible."

Townley nodded. "I caught that," said he; "and Mrs. de Forest saying she'd do the same. We might make a double job of it."

"Precisely my idea," said Patricia, softly.

But Léontine was not content. Once before, and not so very long ago, she had emphatically vetoed a similar proposal because it entailed the murder of an innocent person, and Patricia, without her knowledge and consent, had persuaded the supine Stephan to ignore the counsels of their more experienced associate. Steph-

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an, it is true, had not exposed himself to any personal risk, though he would have shared alike in the profits of the undertaking.

But this insubordination of Patricia had shown Léontine that she could not count on the girl's obedience, and to Léontine a lack of discipline in such a pack as hers must inevitably result in disaster. For a moment she was almost in despair. Hers were the emotions of the she-wolf on finding herself no longer able to control the savage, predatory, and sanguinary passions of her cubs. In that moment she felt herself helpless to restrain them, yet impotently convinced that they were fatally wrong.

And there was another vital factor in Léontine's censure of what was being so slyly suggested by Patricia. Léontine's personality had been changed by the last few years of tragedy and efforts first undertaken to shield her character from the attacks of those who knew it for what it had been. But these very efforts, conducted in the stress of war and directed in behalf of stricken humanity, had finished in a real sincerity of purpose which would have resulted in her salvation but for the ineradicable memory of police records. Her *dossier* was undestroyed, and after the war she had suffered a resumption of police espionage which had driven her back into her career of crime. But with this difference—that all sanguinary acts had become re-

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pellant to her. She might steal, but she could no longer find it in her heart to countenance killing on the part of her associates. She had conceived a horror of destructive violence directed toward her fellow humans.

So now, fearing the worst, and feeling her helplessness, she made a final appeal, this directed not toward the moral natures of her colleagues—because she scarcely believed such to exist—but to their reasons and dread of retribution.

"You must put all such ideas out of your head," said she; "there are too many conditions against us. Remember that we are not in Paris or any other great metropolis where avenues of escape are to be found. We are in the heart of a great continent, where the distances between populous centers are very great and the routes subject to closest scrutiny. As individuals we are conspicuous, unlike the other people of this country. We are well known to the police on the Eastern coast, and no doubt our descriptions have been furnished in detail to the Western. The slightest *faux pas*, the least ground for suspicion, and we should be seized and closely examined and required to account for every moment of our time."

Stephan nodded. "*Sapristi!* But you are right, Léontine," said he. "At first sight these Americans give one the impression of being

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childish and good natured and slipshod in their methods, but the war proved that this is not the case. They are no fools, *ma foi*, however much they may look it."

Patricia nodded, and appeared to be convinced. "I have proved that myself," said she. "Phineas Plunkett looked an imbecile, while Clamp, the peddler, made us all believe that he was a garrulous, gossiping tinker. Yet at the *dénoûment* it was I who played the fool."

"Precisely," said Léontine, "and I had hoped that it might be a lesson to you. There is only one way to conduct a robbery in such a country as this, and that is in the high-handed manner of its bandits, brazenly, openly, and then a dash across the border or into the mountains. But we are not that kind of outlaws; and, besides, we are a long way to the border and know nothing of the mountains. If we were to be silly enough to make any such attempt as you suggest we should only be seized, and spend the best of our years in some of these Western penal institutions."

Stephan appeared unquestionably convinced, but Patricia's eyes encountered those of Townley for the fraction of a second, and in that instant some subtle message was exchanged.

Townley drew out a cigarette and lighted it. "I fancy Léontine's jolly well right," he drawled. "She hasn't taken the trouble to

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mention the most dangerous feature of the case. This Heming girl, damn her, is keen as they make 'em. I've got to grant her that. One glimpse at my phiz and she'd have me ticketed. Besides, women have got a sort of flair. I'd best trek on to the next station."

Léontine looked relieved. "You certainly had, *mon ami*," said she. "You must leave to-night for Salt Lake City."

Patricia appeared to reflect for a moment. "I'm not sure but that we had all better go," said she.

Léontine made a gesture of weariness. "I am terribly fatigued," said she, "and I must say that I should like two days of rest. Besides, we have accepted invitations for this ball and it could do us no harm to make some friends of known standing in this city. It might help us later when we try to leave from the Pacific coast."

"Or perhaps to turn a trick before our departure," murmured Stephan.

Patricia raised her head. "Dear Léontine is always right," said she, limpidly. "Let me now suggest a plan. Howard shall leave to-night by train. We three may attend the ball, and when it is over Stephan and I can change and leave early in the car for Salt Lake City. Léontine may follow by train that night. It is probably a hard pull over the mountains, and

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if Léontine will take the luggage with her we can travel light and make better time."

Léontine looked even more relieved. It seemed to her that her good counsel had prevailed.

"That sounds to me an excellent idea," said she, "so let us make our plans to carry it out. I think now that I shall go in and rest. Remember we have asked our late host, the sheriff, to dine."

She rose and went into an adjoining room. Patricia sprang lightly to her feet. She glanced from one to the other of the two men, then laid her finger on her lips. Her eyes held an expression which Stephan knew, and it sent a shudder through him.

"Let's go find out about your train, Howard," said Patricia.

They went out on the gallery, from which they could look directly down upon the office floor, which was four stories beneath.

"Listen," said she, in the tone of a schoolgirl proposing some elfish prank. "Poor Léontine has quite lost her nerve. We shall have to leave her out of this. She'll forgive us when we come to settle our accounts."

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Chapter XI

THERE is great wealth in the Mile High City and the benefit ball at its perihelion was a fair exponent of this fact. The wives and daughters of Denver are beautiful, while its husbands and fathers are not only rich, but generous, with that lavish indulgence of the West which spends first and asks the price later, in many cases a perfunctory measure. So much of the money to pay the piper comes quickly and easily and directly from the earth—minerals and precious metals, cattle, grain; and always there is a thriving commerce in the city itself, which has not, like many in the East, any very close and jealous competitors. Also, men come in from miles round with the savings of months to bank and spend. Then there are many of independent means there for the health of some member of the family, so that, though high up in the heart of a great continent, and only to be reached by many miles of travel, the city has yet its metropolitan character.

To a certain transient trio of predatory and precarious livelihood it seemed as though the ballroom floor would assay many thousands

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of dollars to the square yard. Exquisite gowns had come by express from many points of the compass, and jewels had been taken from safe-deposit vaults and hotel safes. It had been the *ordre du jour* to make the spectacle a brilliant one, in which Juanita contributed her share in full measure.

"That rope of pearls alone would solve our problems for some time to come," whispered Léontine to Patricia; "and with that jeweled band round her head we could make our *tour du monde en grande ducénesse.*"

"Her corsage piece must have taken a gusher a day's work to buy," Patricia answered, "and it would serve our turn a good deal better because there are so many smaller stones. And what a gown! She looks like the birth of Aphrodite."

There was no denying this. Nita's rich, flaming beauty, spectacular at all times, now seemed to pale her jewels. Her exquisite skin was luminous and gave to the fullness of arms and bosom a diaphanous luster which is the chief charm in a woman who can no longer claim a girlish slenderness. Her gown, the delicate tint of early primroses, set off the ruddy lights in her hair, and her darkly fringed amber eyes seemed to transmit some light from behind them.

"I'm inclined to agree with Howard," mur-

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mured Patricia. "She's got too much for any one woman. It isn't quite fair."

"Think what would happen to the man who killed her if these big Westerners got hold of him," said Léontine.

Both she and Patricia contributed generously to their share of the spectacle, and many a tanned stalwart, looking their way, thought with a sigh of a life spent in mine or remote ranges. Patricia wore her most becoming shade of pale sea foam. Her long, round, supple arms and flawless neck suggested the mermaid or water nymph, while her strange *féerique* features, wide mouth, and light eyes, with their delicately penciled eyebrows turning outward with an upward slant, added to the unmortal beauty which so attracted some while instinctively repelling others.

The older woman was a good foil for her. Léontine's superb body had never lost its willowy suppleness or the extreme smallness of waist which had made her conspicuous in the gay resorts of Europe. Her blue-black hair was snugly coiffed and held by her tiara of a countess, and her mat skin and luminous eyes made her conspicuous among so many highly complexioned faces. Her gown was of velvet, almost silky in its fineness and lightness of weight, in color a royal purple, which is to say a brilliant carmine, very décolleté and follow-

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ing her exquisite curves to be drawn in about the ankles. Her jewels, some real, some imitation, in a way to trick the eye, were more effective in design than intrinsic value, and she gave at once the impression of undisputed elegance.

The sheriff, a spectator of the ball, though not participating in it, watched the two women with a curious confusion of emotions. It struck him as almost a profanation, an unhallowed knowledge, to realize that these two lovely women should be by all rights in the drab costume of a penal institution. To incarcerate Patricia seemed to him to be something atrocious, as if one were to seize a wicked fairy or siren of malicious lure and fetter her in a gloomy dungeon. Patricia, dancing with Chris's friend, Jimmy Barclay, whom Nita had presented, was like some creature of foam and moonbeams, and he was following her drifting movements with burning of melancholy eyes when a hand fell on his shoulder in a friendly grasp.

"Hello, Bob!" said a cheerful voice. "What do you think of your late guests now? Some class, what?"

The sheriff, who was never startled, looked round to see Chris beaming at him from his greater height.

"Howdy, Chris!" he answered, and gripped him by the hand, then examined him up and down. "Lordy, boy, but you look fine!"

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"Feel even better," said Chris; "but don't waste time on me. Just rinse your eyes and look in there. I wonder you let 'em go, Bob. Specially the countess."

"Couldn't hold 'em without violence, Chris. My country down there gave 'em the hump, as Lord Algy Fitzvernon used to say when I took him across the Bad Lands."

"Well, they needn't have said so."

"Oh, that was all right. They blew in with a dust storm. Miss Melton told me it would be a fifty-fifty choice with her between that and jail. But she might see it different if it came to a show-down," he added, grimly.

Chris laughed. "How did she happen to say that? You invited her to stop on?"

The sheriff shot him a quick glance. "She's been giving me away?" he asked.

"Oh no! I shouldn't say she was the sort to give anything away. But I know what it's like when a man's been living alone too long."

"Seems like you haven't lost any time getting acquainted yourself," observed the sheriff.

"No. I happened to be standing by when they lit." And he told of the circumstance of their meeting, and that Patricia had known Juanita Heming previously. The sheriff listened with narrowed eyes and his black brows drawn down.

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"That's Miss Heming dancing with the count," Chris went on. "Her brother and I were in training camp together. He caught a few bugs, too, and we met at the sanatorium. Isn't she a wonder?"

"And then some," agreed the sheriff. His eyes followed Nita as she glided past, and as he noted her gorgeous display of jewels his face hardened still more. "She must be packing about a quarter of a million's worth of sparklers. Chris, take a tip from me and ride close herd on her. There's some bad people floating round this country just now."

Chris's handsome face reflected the expression of the sheriff. "Come over here and sit down a minute, Bob," said he. "I want to tell you something of her history."

They seated themselves at a table near the entrance to the ballroom, and Chris imparted to the sheriff all that Nita had told him of the constant danger in which she stood. The sheriff listened, and his expression grew even more grim.

"I guess that explains why you haven't gone back to your job, boy. You stick round tight a while longer."

Chris looked startled. "Know anything?" he asked.

"Well, I got a hunch that there are some bad people hereabouts," said he, and added,

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carelessly, "Where's the fourth party, Sir Harold Trimble?"

"He had to go on to Salt Lake City. Got some friends there, I believe."

"Uh-huh!" said the sheriff. "Went by train, I suppose?"

"Yes. The count and Patricia are going on in the car to-morrow morning. The countess wants to rest a little before joining the others at Salt Lake. Got to leave you now and do my duty."

"Go to it, son. Come and see me when you get a chance. I'm stopping in the hotel. And look here, Chris, are you packing a gun?"

"Why, no, Bob. I never thought of its being quite as thick as that."

The sheriff moved a little closer, took an automatic from his side pocket, and passed it under the table to Chris.

"Hang that in your pants, boy. I don't know that any special danger threatens Miss Heming, but, as I said, there are crooks in town, and it's just as well to go heeled. Tell her that and stick tight while she's toting all that treasure. Keep your eye peeled for women as well as men. There's a gang shifted their range out here from the East. If anybody acts hostile and tries to sidle up close, just you land them in the hoosegow first and ask questions afterward."

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"But I've got no authority for that, Bob."

"Well, then, consider yourself sworn in as deputy. Do you, and so forth, and so forth?"

"I do," said Chris.

"All right. Skip in there now and amble round a little. I reckon I've got to learn these gaits myself when I knock off and set up for a gentleman of leisure. It certainly gives a fellow some new ideas. Now stand up and walk off so I can see if your artillery shows. That's all right. Mind you don't skid and slide it out across the floor."

And with a brief nod the competent sheriff, forewarned by Charley's Oriental espionage, walked over to speak to an acquaintance.

Chris, rather perturbed by the information just imparted, made his way directly to Nita, who was surrounded by a little group of cavaliers. He claimed the next dance, which was accorded, Nita having left herself free. He was a good dancer, no difficult thing to be with such a partner, and when it was finished he led Nita into an adjoining room, which served as a sort of flirtation corner.

"I have just been talking with Sheriff Bob Hartwell, the man who rescued the countess and her party," said he. "Bob tells me that there are some loose crooks in town; so we've got to be a little careful while you are wearing all this jewelry store."

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"Really, Chris?" Nita did not look particularly disturbed. "But everybody's doing it."

"Yes, but most of these people don't live in lonely bungalows five miles out of town. Bob wouldn't have tipped me off unless he thought he ought to. He's not precisely what you'd call an alarmist. Something or somebody has stirred him up a little. Why don't you leave the trinkets in the hotel safe to-night and to-morrow put them back in safe deposit?"

"Oh, I think we can take a chance to-night, but I will put them back to-morrow, now that I've flaunted them round. Miss Melton's a beautiful dancer, isn't she?"

"Only one better on this floor. I'll give you three guesses. But if you don't want to leave the jewels here I insist on one thing: You must put me up at your place to-night."

"Well, that can be managed. You can have the room next Jerry's."

"It's ridiculous the chances women take with their jewels," Chris complained. "If a man were to carry the equivalent in money from one place to another, he'd want a couple of detectives with him. Yet a woman parades a treasure in a public place before there's no telling how many bandits, then goes out and gets gayly into her car and careers off home and unloads them and chucks them down on her

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dressing table and gets ready for bed with the gems lying round as if they were hairpins or stockings or something."

"You appear to have had experience with bejeweled ladies and their ways," said Nita.

"Oh no! One gets that stuff from the subsequent newspaper account of the theft. It's not fair to weak-kneed honesty. Some moral paralytic is tempted beyond his strength and takes a chance and gets shot and put away for a number of years or kills some one perhaps or gets bumped off himself. They ought to pass a law limiting to about five hundred dollars the amount of gewgaws any one person can tote. But when it runs into hundreds of thousands even a poor but honest fellow like myself is apt to turn the proposition in his mind. He reasons that a woman who can afford so much for ornament isn't going to suffer badly for the loss. Besides, it isn't necessary. A beautiful woman doesn't need them, and if she's homely they only emphasize the disparity between the woman and the jewels."

"You seem to be getting quite nasty about it," said Nita. "I believe you've got designs on them yourself."

"No," said Chris, gloomily. "My cupidity hits higher than that. I want what's underneath them, but I suppose I might as well wish for the sun or moon or something."

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Nita tapped him with her fan. "After all, there's no law against wishing," said she.

"No," said Chris. "I read in some highbrow book that one could have anything one wished if only one wished hard enough. So I think I'll just keep wishing and see what happens. Shall we dance?"

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Chapter XII

"DO you know, Chris," said Nita, as they were hungrily getting away with chicken salad and creamed oysters, "I've actually enjoyed this ball more than any I can remember."

"Same here," said Chris, promptly, "but the answer's easy in my case."

"So it is in mine. You see, it's the first I've been to since Jerry and I came into all this money. Before that, balls were more of a problem than a delight; events that required close figuring as to ways and means, and none of the jewels which you object to, and old gowns made over, and usually a fair sprinkling of partners I hated to touch, but had to be nice to for policy's sake. But it's all so very easy when you're rich."

"You're easily the belle of this party, Nita. I overheard an argument on the subject and they gave you the blue ribbon, with our friend Patricia running a bad second. By the way, where is Patricia? Haven't seen her for the last half hour."

"Spooning in some corner, probably. She's got a dangerous pair of eyes."

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"Dangerous all through, I should say. Highly charged, like an electric eel, or a stingaree, and just as smooth and cool and sinuous."

"She's got real beauty, though of a weird, unearthly sort."

Léontine approached on the arm of Stephan. Nita asked her what had become of her niece.

"Patricia decided to go up to her room," Léontine said. "She asked me to say her good-bys."

"Not ill, I hope?"

"No, but she complained of a giddiness and slight headache. I noticed that after dancing she was quite breathless and very flushed, which is most unusual for Patricia. She said that she felt feverish, and I told her to send for a hotel nurse to take her temperature."

"Altitude, very likely," said Chris. "It gets a good many like that at first."

"Myself also," said Stephan. "My heart is pounding like a worn motor. I think that I shall call up her room and ask after her. Then I may smoke a cigarette if you will give me *congé* for a few moments."

He was moving away when Nita's ear was caught by the shrill voice of a page, who piped with whining monotony, "Miss Heming—telephone message for Miss Heming—Miss Heming."

Chris gave a sibilant hiss, and the boy made his way to where they were sitting.

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"They took the message, sir," said he, and handed him a slip of paper, which he gave to Nita, who glanced it through, then turned an anxious face to the others.

"Listen, Chris. 'Miss Heming's butler telephones that Captain Heming is feeling very badly. The butler thinks that Miss Heming had better return as soon as possible.'"

"I must go at once, Chris."

"Of course. It's probably just the change of weather. Actually muggy—for Denver."

Léontine expressed her sympathy. "I am going up myself to see how Patricia's getting on. It has been a lovely ball and I have enjoyed it so much. It is a revelation to know they do things so well out here on the edge of the Rockies."

"Oh, they live a mile high and a hundred miles wide in Denver," said Chris.

They went out together and, bidding Léontine good night, Nita hurried to the cloakroom.

"You might call up the house while I'm getting my wraps, and ask Antoine about Jerry's condition," said she to Chris.

When, several minutes later, he joined her, his face looked vexed and concerned.

"I couldn't get the house," he said. "First they said the line was busy, and a moment later that they didn't answer."

"Antoine may have been telephoning to the

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sanatorium for a doctor," said Nita. "Well, the best that we can do is to hurry home."

They went out, and in the press of vehicles experienced another vexatious delay in getting the car. "Go as fast as you can, John, but don't get us arrested," said Nita. "Captain Heming has had a bad turn."

As Chris seated himself he became acutely conscious of the pistol loaned him by the sheriff. Taking it out of his pocket, unobserved by Nita, he wedged it in a corner of the cushion at his side. They glided rapidly over the smooth wide thoroughfare, and presently the glow of Denver, which prides itself on being the most brightly lighted city in the world, dropped beneath the level of the plateau, and they found themselves in murky darkness.

"As soon as we get to the house," said Nita, "I'll run up to see Jerry, and you telephone to the sanatorium for an ambulance. He may be going to have another hemorrhage, and in that case he'd better be there." She choked back a little sob. "And I thought the poor boy was on the highroad to recovery."

The bungalow was quickly reached, and as they got out of the car Nita said to the chauffeur: "You may go round to the garage, John, but don't leave until you hear from me. I might need you for something."

Chris, forgetting the pistol in his anxiety for

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his friend, ran up the steps and, trying the door, found it on the latch. But to his still greater surprise there was no sign of the faithful Antoine.

"What's become of the servants?" he exclaimed.

Nita had followed him in. "They must be upstairs with Jerry. Phone right away to the sanatorium, Chris," said she, "then come up."

She rushed up the stairs and into her brother's room, which was lighted, as was the rest of the house. On the threshold she paused, and her hands flew up to her throat, for a shocking sight presented itself. Her brother, whom she had left a few hours before resting comfortably, reading, and in a cheerful state of mind, appeared at first glance to have died of hemorrhage within the last half hour. His face was of a waxen pallor, and the pillow was drenched in bright red arterial blood. At the bedside, leaning over the stricken man, a physician was taking his pulse, while a nurse of rather bulky figure was apparently chafing his feet.

As Nita entered the doctor glanced round at her so that she caught only his profile, which was rather high featured, with a thick brown beard and Vandyke.

"He's in a critical condition, Miss Heming," said he, in a flat, nasal voice. "You'd better

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change as quickly as possible and lend us a hand."

Cold with dread, Nita hastened to her room. She flung aside her ermine coat, divested herself of her jewels, which she threw on the dresser, tore off her dress, and, slipping into a towel bathrobe, hurried back to Jerry's side.

"Is he breathing?" she whispered.

"Rather badly, and his pulse has gone to pieces." He turned to the nurse. "Go jump in the car and hurry to the sanatorium and get some oxygen."

The bulky nurse slipped out, half closing the door behind her.

"Chafe his feet," said the doctor, and Nita obeyed, feeling scarcely able to breathe herself. She was dimly conscious of Chris's voice in agonized accents imploring for a communication.

"What's become of the servants?" she whispered.

"I sent them down to make hot compresses. The maid was hysterical, so I sent her to her room."

There came from below a sort of despairing growl, and Nita heard Chris coming up three steps at a time. He reached the doorway, then stopped, aghast.

"Merciful heaven!" he murmured. "Where was that nurse going?"

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"To the sanatorium for oxygen," wailed Nita. "Oh, Chris, for heaven's sake go down and tell them to hurry with those hot blankets and compresses. He's cold as ice."

Chris turned and bolted below. Nita heard him calling Antoine wildly, then, "There's nobody here."

The doctor rose and turned to the door. "Then heat some water and soak a blanket in it, yourself," he called in a snarling voice, which struck with a paralyzing shock on Nita's ears. She sprang to her feet and stared at the bearded face with agonizing terror in her eyes.

Her stare was returned with so sinister, so diabolic a glare, that Nita's heart seemed to dwindle into faint, attenuated beats. Her knees buckled slowly under her, and she sank to the floor, clinging to the bedpost, conscious, but unable to articulate. For the stream of hate and fiendish gloating triumph which poured from those small, pale, baleful eyes reacted on her mind with that hellish benumbing paralysis which few people ever have experienced except in nightmares. Birds and small animals suffer it often, no doubt, on confronting the flat lifted head of the serpent which tortures them in that brief instant before they become its prey.

The muscles of Nita's throat contracted, her mouth opened and shut, suddenly parched dry. She caught her breath, and a low, strangling

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noise, mumbling and inarticulate, passed between her teeth. She tried again, and this time became coherent.

"Howard Townley!" It was like the last words of the dying.

The hair seemed to part above and below the thin, cruel lips. Nita stared in dread fascination at the prominent canine teeth which she remembered so well. "Not Howard Townley!"

"*Que si—chere Titania*, my ravishing fairy queen! This time I've got you."

As if in a horrible dream Nita heard Chris banging things about in the kitchen below, for the bungalow, though comfortable, was small and simple of arrangement. She wanted to scream, but was unable to muster the strength.

And then that happened upon which the murderer had not counted, just as there is always some vital thing on which most assassins fail to reckon. Had Nita been alone with him she might have died like a fluttering pigeon in the coils of a black snake. But as she glanced at her brother, senseless, dying, as the poor helpless victim of this cold-blooded saurian, there awoke in her that flame of highest courage all creatures know, which is the maternal. It became instantly evident to her numbed intelligence that the ruthless thug had profited by the occasion to enter the house, assassinate the

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servants, who even now might be lying with cut throats in some locked closet, then do her brother nearly to his death, and await her return for the consummation of his sworn vengeance.

And at this last consideration the cobwebs of her mind were brushed away. The apathy of terror dropped from her as she had torn off her gala dress. With her brain on fire, her heart gave a throb which sent the red blood tingling through her tissues, while the nerve impulses discharged were like the loosing of a tremendous spiral spring.

Townley, watching her in satanic triumph, did not miss the yellow blaze in her tawny eyes. His arms flew out, fingers crooked and writhing, just as Nita sprang. She tried to avoid them, but too late. They fastened on her white, creamy throat, thumbs compressing the air passage so that she could not cry out. She beat at his face with her fists, clawed at his eyes, sought to writhe about and fasten her teeth in the bulging forearm. But it was too late, the rim of the bed caught her under the knees, and she went back across it, suffocating, strangling. Lights flashed before her eyes, the roar of cataracts drummed in her ears—and then oblivion.

Townley, his death grip unrelaxed, heard steps bounding up the stairs. Chris, having

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put on the water to heat, was now in search of a blanket. Townley kicked shut the door behind him.

"Don't come in!" he snarled. "Don't interrupt!" and his grip tightened, if such were possible.

"But I say, Nita—what sort of blanket?"

"Any blanket!" growled Townley. "Hurry!"

"But hang it, doctor, the water's got to heat. Nita!"

"She's gone out. Gone to get the car—to fetch another doctor." He loosed his hold on Nita's throat and, reaching to his hip, drew a knife from its sheath. He felt affairs to be hanging in the balance. If the man outside believed him and went down again he could quickly finish his affair with Nita and, dropping through the open window, slip over to where his taxi was waiting. A quick shave of mustache and Vandyke, the removal of the black wig, a change of clothes, and escape seemed easy of achievement.

But in that fraction of a second's wavering hesitation some sixth sense may have warned Chris that here was something foul, some scheme of hell. He had not heard the front door close, Nita would not have left her brother, or at least the house. It was he, Chris, who should have been dispatched. All these were concrete reasonings, and at that crucial moment weighed

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less, perhaps, on his senses than some sinister quality in the voice of the physician.

Chris sprang forward and laid his hand upon the door knob.

Townley heard it and swung about, knife in hand, and as Chris thrust the door inward Townley flung it wide and drove forward at him with a savage snarl.

All that saved the life of Chris in that instant was his grip upon the door knob; also Townley's rush of murder lust. If Chris had loosed his hold he would have stood directly on the threshold, straight in the drive of Townley's knife. But, clinging to the knob, and close to the door, he swung after it toward the right, so that the point of the knife missed him, though its edge slashed him across the side of the ribs.

For Townley, in jerking open the door, had naturally done so with his left hand on the knob —the knife in his right and passing close to the jamb. The bodies of the two big men came together with a jar, and before Townley could recover himself Chris stooped, gripped him about the thighs, and flung him backward over his shoulder and down the hall. Townley tried to scramble up, but Chris had caught a glimpse of Nita's senseless body, and the sight drove him berserk as one of his viking ancestors. With a roar he sprang upon the struggling man, caught the wrist of the hand which held the

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knife, gripped the elbow, and, drawing the forearm across his knee, snapped it as one breaks a fagot. The knife dropped from Townley's nerveless fingers. Chris whipped it up and, with a cough of fury at each successive stroke, let the black soul filter out of him.

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Chapter XIII

THE sheriff had passed a very hectic evening, alternately keeping an eye on the ballroom and greeting the many acquaintances who drifted in and out, for he was widely known and universally esteemed throughout the region.

The display of jewels had not escaped his vigilant eye, and, knowing the character of his four late guests, he felt it incumbent on his sworn office as a servant of the law to keep them under observation during the course of his festivities. Also, his conscience troubled him a little. He felt that he ought to enlighten the hotel detective that the house was sheltering dangerous criminals, but, on the other hand, he found it intensely repugnant to subject those to whom he had so recently rendered hospitality to disgrace and dismissal from the establishment.

"Supposing," said the sheriff to himself, "they've made up their minds that it ain't good enough, and decided to go straight. There are no actual charges against them, and my giving them away might queer their chances

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for living honest and drive them into crime again."

This, it may be evident, was not very sound reasoning in view of what his Chinaman had told him. But even so, the cold-blooded plan suggested by Patricia had been promptly vetoed by Léontine, and the sheriff hoped that she might continue to prove a restraining influence. There was no question in his mind that this girl was the more criminally dangerous, and here there entered another factor to augment his turmoil of conflicting emotions.

For the sight of Patricia in her evening gown was like pouring gasoline on the fire kindled in the sheriff's deep chest. He had never seen women in modern décolleté, bare of back, nearly bare of bosom, with gowns that clung in a manner rather to denude than clothe. And Patricia's inhuman beauty so lent itself to this that she shone in the eyes of the simple but strong-hearted plainsman like some wonderful creature not of this world. The vigor of a physique that would at once explain to an athletic trainer the source of her uncanny strength, was to the sheriff so softened and ameliorated by the cleanliness of her white skin and the melting curves of her arms and shoulders, in which great power lurked, that again he found it difficult to account for the grip that had fallen on his big wrist, forced his heavily muscled arm so

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painfully under him, and the swing that had pivoted him on his heels and flung him to the earth.

His knowledge of her criminal nature did nothing to lessen the force of an infatuation that was overpowering him. Perhaps it augmented this, just as the sight of a wild lioness in splendid fur might stir the desire for capture in the heart of a hunter, whereas the same ferocious animal, sleek and well kept in captivity, would offer no especial attraction. In the other beautiful women present the sheriff saw the domesticated species, but Patricia belonged to the wild, and the lure of the wild was deeply planted in the ranchman's breast.

Patricia, seated, slowly moving her fan, stirred him to the depths, but Patricia dancing set his soul on fire. She seemed to float in the arms of her partners, and the sheriff wondered at their self-possession. He felt that were he to be so placed some ungovernable impulse would overwhelm him.

So he sat and smoked, from time to time exchanging a few jovia words with friend or acquaintance, and determined to see the ball through and his late guests go to their rooms. Then, as he waited, screened by intervening spectators, he saw Patricia come out and go to the elevator.

The hotel was built at a time when economy of space and economy of heating were less con-

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sidered than to-day. The big central area of the ground floor rises straight to the roof, the rooms giving off from galleries, open to observation from below. Drawing back a little, the sheriff presently saw Patricia emerge from the elevator on the fourth story, and, walking a short distance, unlock a door and enter. He wondered a little at her going up when the festivities were at their height, but felt a bit relieved that she had done so. One responsibility removed. A few minutes later he was accosted by a friend, with whom he entered into conversation. They went together to watch the dancing for a few moments, after which the sheriff resumed his former seat.

Patricia, for the moment, was not occupying his mind, but, happening to glance up at the door through which she had disappeared, the sheriff was surprised to see a woman in the white costume of a trained nurse come out and walk to the elevator. He wondered if Patricia had been taken ill, and decided to intercept the nurse and ask, then thought that this might show an unwarrantable interest in the girl's movements. Still, he might have done so, but that the nurse did not appear on the office floor.

For the rest of the night's gayeties the sheriff confined himself to keeping an eye on Léontine and Stephan. But in this he was presently foiled, for they moved into the supper room to

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a position where he could not watch them without intrusion. He did not see Stephan come out, but a little later Léontine emerged, talking with Chris and the young woman whose beauty and jewels had excited so much admiration throughout the evening. There seemed no reason to the sheriff why he should not go up and speak to them, or at least to Léontine, who detached herself and, saying good night, went to the elevator.

She greeted the sheriff cordially. He mentioned having seen Patricia go up an hour before and expressed the hope that she was not ill.

"Not actually ill," Léontine answered, "but rather tired and complaining of a headache and a slight giddiness. Mr. Carmichael thinks it may be the altitude."

"It sometimes affects strangers that way," the sheriff agreed, "though we're only a mile high here."

"She said that she would call for the nurse to take her temperature," Léontine observed. "She and my brother want to make an early start and go on to Salt Lake to-morrow morning, but I shall persuade her to go with me by train and let Stephan take the car alone."

"That would be a lot better," said the sheriff. "If she feels this height the road over the pass might hit her pretty hard. I thought you counted on stopping here some days."

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"We have changed our plans and must be getting on, as we've still got a long way to travel," said Léontine.

The sheriff scarcely knew whether to be glad or sorry at this news. It relieved him of responsibility, but the thought that he was not to see immediately this girl who had so obsessed him brought with it a bitter disappointment.

"Well, countess," said he, "I suppose, then, it's got to be good-by for the present. I'd like to have a little talk with you before you go."

"Then come and lunch with me to-morrow," said Léontine, who was quick to see the advantage of being publicly remarked with so well-known a personality and officer of the law. "Whether or not I can persuade Patricia to wait, I shall be here in any case." She gave him her hand and said good night.

The sheriff, as he turned away, wondered what she would have to say when he told her of his knowledge of their true identity, with a warning to keep her party inside the pale of the law. For this he had fully decided to do, should in fact have done it sooner, he thought.

There being no apparent necessity for further espionage, the sheriff went wearily up to his room—for his emotional evening had tired him more than a day's hard work on his ranch could have done—and went to bed. It was then about three o'clock, and it seemed to the sheriff

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that he had scarcely closed his eyes when he was roused by the clamor of his telephone bell. Like most men who have lived long close to the wild, the sheriff did not waken by degrees, but all at once like a wolf or wildcat. More than that, his sixth sense told him that something was amiss, that his official service was in demand.

"Sheriff Hartwell?" asked a voice with an Irish accent.

"Yes."

"Mister Carmichael says will yez come out to Miss Heming's house as quick as ever you can."

"All right," said the sheriff. "What's up?"

"Mister Carmichael taold me to say nothing, sor, but to ask you to get out here as quick as ever the Lord would let you." And he gave the sheriff the address.

In the first few seconds a fireman might have learned something from the sheriff's speed in getting into his clothes. Naturally the fireman might have beat him, the donning of his costume being more simplified, but, garment for garment, the sheriff must have won. Not waiting for the elevator, he went down flight after flight something in the fashion of a big-horned sheep descending a precipice. But for all his haste he did not neglect to pocket a pair of handcuffs, a length of steel chain, and a pistol,

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for the sheriff was a two-gun man. He had garaged his car close to the hotel and he had it mobilized about as quickly as a taxi could have been captured at that hour. Speed regulations not applying to the sheriff, it is safe to say that he beat all previous records out to the plateau by a very considerable margin.

The Hemings' bungalow was lighted up. As the sheriff rushed up the steps and into the house he was met by Chris, whose face looked as though chiseled in marble and set with a pair of eyes as hard as jade.

"What's up?" the sheriff demanded.

"Looks like a double murder," Chris answered, evenly. "Can't tell yet. The doctors are working over them. Juanita Heming and her brother."

In a few brief words he told of what had happened.

"It was an easy plant," continued Chris. "He located Nita at the ball, then came here with the nurse, who was, of course, a man in disguise. It was a simple thing to break in and grab the servants in their rooms. They gagged and bound them, then lugged them down and locked them up in a cellar trunk room. The doctors say they must have given Heming a jab of morphine, then poured a bottle of red ink over his pillow and pajamas. As soon as Heming was unconscious this thug telephoned

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for Nita to come right out, then cut the telephone wires some distance from the instrument. Lord! Bob, but he came within one jump of getting clean away with it! But there was something in his voice that put my hair up. Even then he'd have managed it if he hadn't been in such a hellish hurry. I'd left the gun you gave me in the car."

"Let's have a look at him," said the sheriff.

Chris led him up the stairs and down the corridor, then opened the door of a bathroom. The body of Townley was lying in a horrid welter. The sheriff took a single glance at his face and stepped out, closing the door behind him.

"I thought so!" he growled. "Sir Harold Trimble, supposed to be in Salt Lake City."

"What? The fourth of the countess's party?"

"Yes. The nurse was Patricia Melton. I've been a damned fool. This is my fault, son."

"But I don't get you," said Chris.

"I want to see Miss Heming."

"She's still unconscious, and the doctors from the sanatorium are working over her. They say that it's about an even chance that she pulls through. She's been strangled to the point of death and the circulation practically cut off from the brain, so as to leave a dangerous congestion. Bob, if you knew what those people were, why didn't you tell me?"

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The sheriff's face was haggard. "I only knew about the two women and the man Stephan. I couldn't get a line on this skunk you slaughtered. My report on the others was that they were dangerous European crooks, but with no charges to warrant their arrest. I kept them under my eye until they went to bed—or at least I thought I had. The girl, Patricia, shifted into the nurse's costume at the hotel. I saw her go into her room and a little later I saw the nurse come out. She looked like a big, stocky woman, with black hair and spectacles. Now show me Miss Heming's room."

Chris did so. Nita's clothes were lying as she had thrown them down on hurriedly changing. The sheriff rummaged through the drawers, searched every available nook and corner, but it was evident to Chris that he did not expect to find anything.

"Just as I thought," growled the sheriff. "They rigged this plant to steal the jewels. Then Miss Heming must have suspected something, and he tried to choke her into silence."

A doctor came in. "We've got her to breathing," said he. "Brain congestion is the trouble now."

"Will she pull through?" asked Chris, in a dry, croaking voice.

"Can't promise it yet. Captain Heming is out of danger, though." And he went out again.

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The sheriff flung open the window. In the east the first light of dawn was striking down from the sky, now clear and cloudless, and the rims of the Rockies, not far distant, were edged with crimson. The sheriff turned his strained face to Chris.

"They can't get far," said he. "The chances are they don't know that this assassin got his, and there's no reason for them to suspect that, even so, he's been recognized or that anybody is on to them. The countess told me that Patricia and Stephan might make an early start in the car to go on to Salt Lake. Stephan must have been waiting outside with the car, and as soon as she got the jewels they beat it. The countess and your man figured to go there by rail. What time did you get back here?"

"About half past two."

The sheriff glanced at his watch. "Well, they can't have got far. We're just as sure of them as if we had them under lock and key. Where can I telephone?"

"Next door."

"Then I'll report the murder to police headquarters. But look here, Chris, I'd rather not report the robbery just yet. It was my fault, and I want to collar this pair myself."

"Whatever you say, Bob," Chris answered, lifelessly.

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"They've got no reason to think we're on to them. They're headed out on the trail for Salt Lake, and I can soon overhaul them."

"I'll go with you." Chris stepped to the window and looked out, then turned to the sheriff with a trace of animation on his drawn features. "I say, Bob, how do we know they're heading for Salt Lake? That may be just a blind. For all we know they may be making for Canada or Mexico. But as you say, they can't get far. I understand your wanting to collar them yourself. Now, what about this for a plan? We can go over to the hangar and jump into my bus and circle the country until we pick them up. There won't be many big cars going over the road at this hour."

"Don't you want to stay here, son?"

"There's nothing I can do here, and the suspense is apt to send me off my head. I'd rather clear out and do something, and learn what's happened when I get back. The doctors say she may be unconscious for hours if she comes round at all."

The sheriff reflected for a moment. Chris stared out through the open window. "It's going to be still and clear," he said.

"All right!" said the sheriff. "If we miss them we can land at some town and send out word to block the roads."

"And if we pick them up," said Chris, "we

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can make a landing on the road ahead and stop them. They've got no reason to suspect that their job has gone wrong."

The sheriff nodded. "I'd a lot rather nail them myself," said he, "since I'm responsible for what's happened."

"What about the countess?" Chris asked.

"If she's still at the hotel she'll wait," the sheriff answered. "Somehow I've got a hunch that she ain't in on this. But if she's with the others we'll rope her in at the same time. Come on, let's go."

Chris nodded. "One minute, Bob," said he. "One minute, and I'll be with you. It may be the last time I'll see her alive."

He stepped to the door of Juanita's room and entered. A moment later he came out again, motioned to the sheriff, and they went down the stairs and out, the air very still and of a glittering clearness.

"Perfect flying day," said Chris, in a dead voice. "Visibility about a hundred miles. Think you can spot their car, Bob?"

"Far as I can see it. They've got a new-fangled contraption that I've only seen once in these parts. Look for a strip of green on the wind shield."

Stepping into the sheriff's car, they drove across to the hangar, where Chris awoke a sleepy machinist.

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"The sheriff wants to requisition the three-seater for official business," said Chris, briefly.

The plane was wheeled out and got ready for flight.

"I've had an extra tank put in this one," said Chris, "to make nonstop flights to Omaha or Kansas City. Two or three times we've had a client who wanted to get somewhere in a hurry. Better have a bite before you start, Bob."

He went to his locker and produced biscuits and sardines, with a jar of cheese and a couple of bottles of ginger ale. They ate mechanically, a good deal as the machinist poured gasoline into the full tanks. Then, all being in readiness, they got into their flying clothes and climbed aboard. The machinist cranked the fan. The light plane taxied across the smooth stretch, rose gently, then swam higher into the keen, fine air.

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Chapter XIV

PATRICIA, slipping out of the Heming bungalow, heavy laden with her spoils, smiled to herself at the ease with which her coup so masterly planned had been accomplished. She walked down to the corner, then turned to the right, and came presently to where Stephan was waiting with the big touring car.

"It is all right?" he whispered, eagerly. "You have them?"

"The whole collection," she answered, with a gurgling laugh.

"She did not suspect?"

Patricia got in behind. The hood was drawn and the side curtains rigged. "No. Hurry, now! You are sure you know the road?"

"Yes; I have studied the map."

They started off rapidly. Patricia opened a valise and took out her riding clothes and a dust coat. She then began to divest herself of her nurse's costume. Pulling off a black wig, she threw it into the sack and, relieved of her white uniform, began to unwind from her supple waist a light traveling rug.

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"It was easy as winding your watch. At sight of her brother unconscious and the red ink poured over everything, she was too frightened to be observant. Howard is a good actor. He imitated perfectly a worried American doctor."

"But the man, this Chris?"

"We kept him out. The servants were supposed to have lost their heads and Howard sent him to heat the water. He sent me also to fetch oxygen from the sanatorium. The telephone was out of order—wires were cut—and presently he will go next door to call for another doctor. Once out of the house, he will get into his taxi and return to the Metropolitan Building. Then he will get another taxi and go to the station, where he can shave and change his clothes and get rid of his black wig in the lavatory."

Patricia began to draw on her riding breeches.

"But if she should recognize him?"

"I do not think there is the slightest danger. The beard, his wig, and the glasses are a complete disguise, and Howard is a good mimic. Besides, she is far too concerned about her brother to think of anything else. When Howard fails to return she may become suspicious, and then if she discovers that her jewels are gone she will give the alarm. But if Howard is quick and clever he ought to manage it. That's

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his lookout. I can't see any possible danger for ourselves."

"I am not so sure," Stephan answered. "There are three great dangers."

"Of course!" Patricia's voice had a contemptuous cut. "There is always danger to a job like this. But I do not think there is any for us."

"What if he were to be taken at the station, and round on us when identified by the Heming girl?"

"Why should he? It could not help his case, whereas he knows Léontine's orthodox technic in sparing no money or pains to defend one of her workers who happens to get caught."

"But Léontine knows nothing about this job."

"That makes no difference," said Patricia. "She shall get her share all the same. If we had let her know she would have stopped it. She would not trust Townley alone with the Heming girl."

"*Sapristi!* But I feel the same about it. His hatred for her is a monomania. At this very moment I would not give a hundred dollars for her life."

"I wouldn't give two sous for it," said Patricia, indifferently. "To tell the truth, Stephan, it would surprise me very much to learn that either she or her brave Chris was still alive."

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She began coolly to put on her silk riding shirt. Stephan threw her a frightened glance over his shoulder. "Keep your eyes on the road!" snapped Patricia, and Stephan obeyed with a startled jerk of his head.

"But did you count on that?" he muttered.

"Of course," Patricia answered in her most limpid voice. "I did not actually advise it, because I felt that I could count on Howard's hatred. I don't think I ever knew a better hater. I happen to know something about him that explains it. His father really was an English duke, and his mother a Spanish dancer at the Alhambra. She tried once to poison and once to knife him shortly before Howard's birth. He had promised to marry her. Howard was born, as you might say, with a caul of hatred."

"But I thought he was Australian?"

"When his mother killed herself the duke sent the baby out there with the wife of the superintendent of his sheep station. But to get back to this job, I knew that once Howard was alone with the girl he would not be able to restrain himself."

"But her trying to trap him was natural, since it was to save her brother," Stephan objected.

"But you are stupid, *mon ami.* His hatred was not because she trapped him. It was be-

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cause he was mad about her and thought that she had fallen a victim to his fascinations. Hell may have no fury like a woman scorned, but there are worse places than hell; cold places between the worlds; and Howard's hatred was something of that sort when he discovered that she had made a silly fool of him. He is a bit like me in that respect. Even to-day I can't think of Clamp, the peddler, without a *vertige*. I doubt if I could keep from killing him, should the opportunity offer. In the present case I had counted on this, and don't you see that it is the best thing that could happen? By this time he has probably killed the girl, and Monsieur Chris also; and with these two removed there is nobody who could identify him. The servants were taken by surprise in the dark. That is the reason why I insisted that we keep Léontine in ignorance of our plan."

A shudder seemed to ripple through the man at the wheel. He turned up the corner of his coat. "You are terrible, Patricia," he muttered.

Patricia gave her limpid laugh and proceeded to pack the nurse's costume into the valise. The jewels she stuffed into the pockets of her riding breeches. "I am terribly consistent, *mon ami*. As a disciple of Chu-Chu you must admit as much. Now please don't talk for a while. I am tired and want to snatch a little sleep. Be sure that you do not mistake the road."

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"There is no danger. I have memorized every turning."

Patricia disposed her supple body comfortably and drew the fleecy traveling rug over her, for the early-morning air was keen.

The car sped on swiftly, and before long the dawn broke, to usher in a day as perfect as that region could produce, which is the last word in perfection. Two hours passed, and they began mounting the higher slopes; another hour, when the character of the country changed to steep hills and gorges. Stephan was chilled and hungry, but still Patricia slept on, and he dared not waken her to get out the provisions with which they had supplied themselves.

Despite the success of their achievement the man was conscious of a vague oppression, which, however, he ascribed to the increasing altitude. Unlike Patricia and Townley, he was an incomplete criminal, lacking not in cruelty or ruthlessness, but that cold courage requisite to sustain these qualities. Léontine, on the contrary, had never been a complete criminal, because of certain temperamental elements and a heart that was far from devoid of the quality of mercy. Crime to her had always been a game rather than a profession, and most of her unlawful acts had been inspired by the love of some master of the underworld. She would always have been utterly incapable of working alone as Pa-

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tricia had done, and it is probable that if she had made such an attempt it would have ended disastrously.

For the successful thief, the complete criminal, must be unhampered by the faintest accent of scruple; must be supremely egotistic; as regardless of any other existence as the shark or crocodile. Unquestionably the thief is the meanest of all living creatures, because he must be devoid of the passion of blind impulse, which to a certain degree is an extenuation of other sins against mankind. He cannot advance insanity or a distorted mental balance as an excuse, for of all ill-doers the successful thief must be the sanest, the most logical as well as imaginative. Such supine creatures as steal through impulse or greed or weakness in the face of temptation are quickly suppressed, just as those who, prepared to steal, yet through fear or conscience shirk a sanguinary avenue of escape, are quickly caught. For this reason the armed burglar who enters a house with a motive of theft, and prepared to slay the householder or other inmates if detected, is deserving of no mercy. Such an act should be a capital offense rather than a prison one.

Stephan was by nature a low-grade thief, more in the class of swindlers and forgers and defaulters. Often he trembled at the merciless traits of those with whom he found himself

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associated, while yet he extracted a vicriaous courage from them. If cornered he would not prove lacking in courage, preferring, like these others, death to capture, but he could not have brought himself to the planning and execution of such deeds as this at which he was now assisting.

Several times as the car sped along he glanced back at Patricia and wondered how she could sleep so reposefully. The girl's *féerique* face and supple body, relaxed to the swaying of the car, suggested a sprite slumbering on a lily pad rocked in the ripples of a pond. The sun rose higher in the glittering sky, and suddenly Patricia awoke, sat up, and looked about her.

"We're getting into the mountains," said she. "What a gorgeous day! I'm hungry."

"*Sapristi!* but so am I," said Stephan. "You might get out the lunch basket from under the seat."

Patricia did so, and they made a breakfast of fruit and sandwiches and strong tea from the vacuum bottle. They had passed no cars, for the tourist season was over. A little later, as they were approaching a gorge with precipitous sides, Stephan looked up, then motioned to the right.

"An airplane," said he.

Patricia followed his gaze. The plane was well up, a mile high, perhaps, and another mile

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to their right, but as they watched its course it seemed to swerve slightly in their direction and drift a little lower.

"I don't like it," said Stephan.

"Nonsense!" said Patricia. "We've seen dozens of them all along our route. Probably a postal service over the pass."

But a moment later her heart began to beat a little faster, for the plane, without actually making a veerage, seemed to drift in toward them, as though borne laterally by a draught of high air, while there could be no question of its slanting downward. It seemed to hover directly over the road ahead and at an elevation which had appreciably diminished, then, as though straightening its course, dropped slightly and disappeared behind a ridge.

The road at this point was fairly wide and very smooth. On either side the slope rose for about a hundred yards in broken masses of rock which mounted to the foot of steep cliffs, much eroded, a sort of diminutive cañon. This ascended in a series of broad titanic steps to an elevation of several hundred feet. Patricia made a swift examination of either side. Ahead was a tangent of about three quarters of a mile before the next turning.

"I don't like it," Stephan repeated.

"Nor I," said Patricia. "He swung in as if to look us over. Stop the car."

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Stephan slowed, and came to a halt at the side of the road. "What do you want to do?"

Patricia opened the door and got down. "It looks to me like history repeating itself," said she. "Do you remember how Clamp, the peddler, put his motor truck across the road?"

"*Ma foi, oui!* And how you hurled into the sea what we thought to be the Sultana."

"Precisely. But there is no sea here. Why should an airplane swing out of its course to have a look at us? What is interesting about a car? Stop your motor and get down." She reached for the valise with its incriminating contents, and handed it to Stephan as he alighted.

"What are you going to do?"

"I am going to climb to the top of this first ledge and put the jewels in a safe place. You take this valise up to the foot of the cliffs and drop it in a fissure and cover it with rocks. Then we can go on, and if this proves to be a false alarm we can come back a little later for the jewels."

"*Sapristi!* But you are right," said Stephan. "There is really no great hurry about the jewels. We can remember the spot by that crude cross in the side of the cliff."

They turned to the left and began to clamber over the loose rocks, Stephan a little awkwardly, Patricia with the surefootedness of a

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mountain sheep. At the foot of the cliffs Stephan looked up in dismay.

"But you will break your neck," he protested.

"No jolly fear! The face of the cliffs is rough."

"But why not hide them here?" His swarthy face darkened. "Can it be possible that you do not trust me?"

Patricia's wide mouth flickered up in her mocking smile with the characteristic lifting of her left eyebrow. Then suddenly this expression vanished, for the thin air began to vibrate with a low-toned thrumming like the hum of a giant bee. It seemed to permeate the place, to fill their ears from all points of the compass. Then the blood sucked from Stephan's face to leave it a ghastly, mottled yellow.

"Look!" he croaked, and pointed toward the far end of the gorge.

Against the deep, fathomless azure of the sky appeared the airplane, its wings so thin as to be scarcely visible, hanging very low above the crest of the broken rocks and heading straight for the roadway ahead. Patricia's hand fell on Stephan's arm with a grip that brought from him a cry of pain.

"Howard has bungled it," said she. "Quick! Throw that valise into the crevice yonder, and cover it with rocks," and she turned to the face of the cliffs.

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"But where are you going?"

"Up to hide these jewels. If they find them at all, and my clothes, it means the gallows."

And she started to swarm up the eroded façade with the swift, sinuous movements of a yellow lizard.

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Chapter XV

UNDER less tragic circumstances the sheriff would have thoroughly enjoyed the experience of his first flight in the high air, his nature being one to appreciate keenly the rush of new sensations. But in his capacity of observer he scarcely took note of these, or, if so, they were of a chaotic, unassimilated sort.

From the moment that Chris, swinging on a wide orbit, began to circle the town, the keen eyes of the sheriff were riveted on the yellow ribbons which radiated from the Mile High City, at first like swirling meshes from the center of a spider's web, then, as they increased their scope, growing straighter, and more sharply defined.

The maneuvers of Chris were those of his prototype, the hawk, circling the meadow, with its keen eyes cast downward to follow the runways of its rodent prey. At that hour there were few cars in motion, and, flying low, the brilliant clearness of the atmosphere enabled the sheriff to eliminate them from his quarry, for there was one peculiarity to this which was now of the greatest value. Its top had been

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new at starting, and was still bright, a rather pale shade of khaki, and—far more important than this not unusual designation—it carried an innovation not yet frequent in the West, this being a green strip of glass about a foot wide on the upper wind shield, an excellent idea to protect the eyes of those in front from the searching glare. Should this be raised it would betray the car from a tremendous height and distance, and, as the day was mild and the sun intense, the sheriff reasoned that such would be the case.

The fugitives had got more than two hours' start, from which it was not difficult to estimate the approximate length of their radius from the point of their departure taken as a center. But, making due allowance for possible delay, Chris described his eccentric circles carefully, and as these widened they began to attain such dimensions that the sheriff was troubled with doubts as to whether or not they might be able to keep pace with a car traveling in a direction fairly straight.

For three hours, perhaps, they described these gradually widening circles. The misgivings of the sheriff had, of course, occurred to Chris, who, as an engineer and an able geometrician, was trying to make some rough calculation as to the ratio of speed and distance between a car traveling at thirty miles an hour in a fairly straight line from the center, and an airplane

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proceeding in a spiral at four times that rate of speed. As one may see, this was a problem that took some considerable calculation, for it must be remembered that the ratio was an inconstant one, each widening arc of the airplane increasing the advantage to the car.

At the end of two hours it became evident to the sheriff that Chris had decided to abandon these tactics and take a sporting chance on Stephan and Patricia's having staked everything on the success of their stratagem and boldly following the course announced, for Chris headed in a southwesterly direction and held to it in a bee line, to pick up presently the route for the pass, the topographical features of which the sheriff immediately recognized from his knowledge of the region. Keeping a little to the northward of this, and about a mile high, they had traveled for about forty minutes when suddenly the strong heart of the plainsman gave a throb which felt to him enough to disturb the balance of the flying fabric. His hand fell on Chris's shoulder.

"There they go!" he shouted. "We got 'em, boy!"

Chris, looking down, saw what appeared to be a yellow-backed beetle with a bright green eye crawling sluggishly over the slender band of cream-colored road. He did not doubt the assurance of the sheriff, but was for the moment

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perplexed as to how best he might intercept the course of this venomous insect. Experience told him that, though from their elevation the road appeared to wind between low, flat hammocks, these might in reality be hills and ridges of considerable height, and so broken as to offer no landing place between.

To examine the contour more closely he planed down for about two thousand feet, at the same time edging over toward the highway, which he now discovered by the shadows thrown to wind through a gorge of considerable depth. He dropped a little lower, passing ahead of the car at a height of not over a thousand feet, which cleared the ridge ahead by no very great margin. The road turned sharply northward at this point. So Chris banked and followed it, only to discover that the more deeply it entered the steep, broken hills, the more difficulty there would be in landing.

Turning the situation quickly in his mind, Chris came to a swift decision. In passing the car he had observed that about two miles ahead of its position there was a tangent of the road that appeared to be wide and straight. It would be a delicate task to plane down between the steep cliffs and make his landing on the road itself. But the air was very still, the fabric which he directed beautifully balanced and of quick control, and Chris a skilled and experi-

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enced pilot. He determined to make the attempt, provided he could get back to this spot before the car reached it, which seemed to him a little doubtful.

So he banked sharply and skimmed back in his aërial tracks. It occurred to him that even if he were to succeed in his attempt to block the road ahead, the car might turn and make off in the other direction. Were this to happen the pursuer and pursued would be in the position of a hawk circling a rabbit in a runway, unable to strike its quarry, owing to the nature of the covert, yet preventing its escape. Chris reflected that they would have done better to have taken the sheriff's car for the pursuit, assuming that the fugitives were sufficiently sure of the success of their coup to carry out the plan they had so boldly announced and to depart from which might have placed them open to suspicion.

But a few moments later, as he volplaned over the ridge and the straight stretch of highway came in sight, his heart gave a throb of exultation, for he saw the car about two miles away and apparently halted. The next few moments were critical ones, in which the slightest error of direction might easily precipitate a fatal result, for it was more than vital to land squarely on the road. He must continue to follow its course after landing. The slightest

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swerve meant destruction, not only to the plane, but to its occupants. A sudden gust of air, a draught up or down the gorge, would have flung them among the broken rocks on either side, there being no direction to the wheels of an airplane, which even on the ground must depend upon its aërial rudder.

Chris was taut as one of the wire stays of his wonderful little fabric. He glided down into the gorge, felt the slight shock of *terra firma* beneath, rolled a little distance, then, as they came almost to a stop, swerved dangerously, and fetched up obliquely across the road and about a quarter of a mile ahead of the car.

They freed themselves from their seats and sprang out, and as they did so the sheriff seized Chris by the arm. His keen hunter's eye, trained to search the face of a rocky wall for mountain sheep or goats, had discovered a drab figure moving up the side of the precipice about fifty feet above its foot.

"Look, Chris! That's Patricia." And he began to tear off his flying clothes. Chris followed his example.

"What's her game?" demanded Chris.

"Search me—unless she wants to hide the jewels and don't trust Brother Stephan. We've got to nail her before she can manage it, otherwise good-by jewels."

They flung off their clothes and started to

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run down the intervening stretch of road. Before they had reached the car Patricia was halfway up to the first wide shelf. Stephan had disappeared, crouched among the big stones, and as they started to clamber over these a shot rang out and a bullet sang close to the ear of the sheriff. He dropped on his face and began to wriggle forward, pistol in hand. Chris, drawing his own weapon, deployed to the right, and as he was worming his way to the foot of the cliffs he caught a glimpse of Stephan's head and shoulders as he rose cautiously from behind a stone to shoot again. Chris fired, and Stephan seemed to spring forward and upward, sprawling across the flat bowlder that had sheltered him.

"Got him, son!" roared the sheriff, and they both rose and rushed forward.

Stephan's body was twitching convulsively, and a stream of blood was trickling over the edge of the rock. Chris, a trained marksman, had shot him through the head at a range of about eighteen yards. He looked up, and saw Patricia about fifty feet above him, flattened against the rough surface up which she swarmed, sending down a shower of the crumbling shale. Flinging off his coat, Chris started to climb after her.

Here was a crucial test for the efficacy of his cure. He had passed through a fearful night, guided his airplane for hours in a state of con-

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stant tension, run a quarter of a mile in an altitude of six or seven thousand feet, and now, breathless from this burst of speed, attacked the almost vertical ascent. His ears were thrumming, and his breath coming with quick gasps; he was yet well within the limit of his physical force. The brief pause occupied in the stalking of Stephan had restored his breath, and now the training of what had been for years his favorite sport made possible an undertaking which in itself would have given pause to most athletes.

It never occurred to either of the men to fire on Patricia. One may call this chivalry, perhaps, though masculinity might be the better word. Aside from all personal feeling, the sheriff could not have found it in him to shoot, with intent to kill, at any fleeing woman, however evil, while in the case of Chris some racial prejudice would have risen to inhibit the act. He might have sent her to the gallows, but to slay her with his own hand never so much as entered his head.

So now, with practiced hand and foot, he went up the face of the ragged cliff almost as a sailor might have run up the rigging of a ship. The ascent, though dangerous by reason of the loose, crumbling formation, was not difficult to the experienced rock climber. Perhaps, also, the spot he had chosen was easier than that

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taken by Patricia, for he gained rapidly. By the time Patricia had flung herself over the rim of rock Chris's hands were clutching at it also.

If Patricia had known that he was so near the top she might have seized the opportunity for a fatal attack, flung him downward, or, snatching up a jagged rock, hurled it on his head. But her whole thought and effort had been concentrated on flight, less in any hope of ultimate escape than that she might have time to secrete her incriminating plunder in some spot that would defy all hope of its recovery by her pursuers. Her swift and subtle criminal mind told her that without this evidence and that in the valise, which Stephan had already hid, a conviction would be difficult if not impossible. She felt certain now that Townley had killed Nita and most probably been slain himself, as she did not believe that he would submit to capture. In such a case there was nobody who could swear to her identity. But even if she were to be arrested and convicted as a participator in the crime of robbery the jewels would still be there on her release from prison. If, on the other hand, they were to be taken on her person, the least that she could expect would be life imprisonment as accessory in the murder of Nita; and Patricia would have chosen death in preference to this.

After Stephan's first shot Patricia had not

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once looked backward, but centered all her attention on getting to the top of the cliff. She did not even pause for a downward glance until she had scrambled to her feet and run on fifty yards to the foot of the next ledge, for this side of the gorge rose, as has been said, in a series of giant steps.

So, as Chris scrambled up over the rim, he saw her standing there scanning the face of the ledge above, as though to determine its easiest point of attack. Her back was turned to him, and it was not until she heard the scuffle of his feet as he ran toward her, panting heavily, that she discovered his presence.

The expression of Patricia's face at this moment was such as to halt any individual, no matter of how high a courage. But Chris was beyond the limits of fear or reason. He saw before him no more than a treacherous yellow cat of a girl who had lent her evil intelligence to the murder of the woman he so dearly loved. He desired merely to seize and overpower her and hale her back to pay the penalty of her crime in whatever way the justice of the country might ordain. It never entered his head that she might seek to defend herself by force. The deadly, sinister atmosphere of her was lost upon him. He did not even stop to consider that she might be armed, which, fortunately for him, she was not.

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Slowing to a walk, he stepped up to where she stood eying him balefully.

"You are under arrest as accessory in the murder of Juanita Heming," he said.

Patricia did not move. She stared at him for a moment with an expression of mocking contempt, and then, before Chris could receive any intuition of her purpose, she stepped quietly in front of him and raised slightly her two hands.

"Do you want to iron me?" she asked.

"No," Chris answered. "I could scarcely get you down from here ironed, even if I had the bracelets, which I have not. You may come with me quietly, and we will try to find some easier way than the one we came up by." His eyes rested on the bulging pockets of her riding breeches, and Patricia did not miss the significance of their expression.

She was standing close to Chris, both arms slightly bent, her pale eyes staring into his. And then, as he waited for her to move or make some sign of acquiescence, she seemed to sway a little closer, one of her hands flashed up in a motion so quick that his eye could scarcely follow it.

There was a sharp, terrific impact at the angle of his jaw, a sort of explosion in his brain substance, and he sank down gently into oblivion.

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Chapter XVI

A SEARCHING examination, which took at least ten seconds, satisfied the sheriff that Stephan was no longer to be reckoned with as a power of evil on the mortal plane. This fact established, he followed Chris's example, flung off his coat, and started up the side of the cliff. Though less nimble than the younger man, the sheriff was as good a mountaineer as one could find in the Rockies, which is saying enough. He had been a hunter of sheep and goats and puma, the last a practically useless endeavor without the aid of hounds, which canine accessories had been banned from the pursuit of all game by the wiseacres at Washington, and which finding, in the case of destructive vermin, the sheriff as an officer of the law had felt himself bound to observe.

Being strong and active despite his forty and odd years, and with an equilibrium oblivious of height vertigo, the sheriff went up the side with a steady deliberation which got him to the top just in time to see Chris crumple down on the rock under the impact of Patricia's scientific blow. At the same moment her eyes dis-

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covered him, and for the first time she became aware of the identity of the second of her pursuers.

For a moment Patricia did not stir. Then she moved past Chris and walked slowly with her clinging step to meet this new aggressor, and as the sheriff watched her he was more than ever reminded of his captive puma. But he acknowledged this difference—that the puma, though a ferocious slayer, does not possess real courage, and when cornered will die tamely rather than put up a fight.

The lust of combat was now pouring from Patricia's light, baleful eyes in a yellow flood. She realized at that moment that she had disposed of one pursuer and that if able to achieve the destruction of them both there would be a fighting chance for her escape.

Her swift intelligence seized instantly upon a plan which, if carried out successfully, might baffle justice and defy conviction of any part in the destruction of these two men who had brought her to bay. Chris was not apt to regain consciousness for several minutes, she thought, and if now she could render the sheriff *hors de combat* the rest would be easy, provided nobody passed over the road within the next half hour.

This was her stratagem—to deal with the sheriff as she had with Chris, then drag the

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bodies of the two men to the brink of the ledge and tumble them over. Then, wheeling the airplane to the spot where they had fallen, she might be able so to wreck it that it would appear to have fouled the wall of the gorge. The fan might be smashed with a piece of rock, a wing likewise damaged, and the whole machine capsized, when it would appear as if, forced to descend, the pilot had been unable to make a landing on the road, but, striking the side, had dashed the pair to their death.

Patricia did not believe Stephan had been killed. Knowing the craven streak in the man, she thought it more probable that he had surrendered at the first shots, and was probably ironed to the car. But the key to the handcuffs would be in the sheriff's pocket, and on being released it would not take the pair of them long to give the tragedy a semblance of an accident. That once effected, they might proceed on their way unmolested.

As all this flashed through Patricia's mind with such an instantaneous cerebration as might have occurred in that of a wild animal that finds itself brought to bay by a swift forerunner of the pack, she could feel within her a welling up of terrific physical impulse such as she had never experienced in any critical moment of her fatal past. It was almost with an eagerness,

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an avidity, that she moved to meet the one enemy who stood between her and the hope of escape. In that moment the puma was less her prototype than the tigress. The sheriff realized this, and as he caught the yellow stream of hatred and ferocity pouring from her eyes, he came closer to a thrill of dread than had ever happened in a life far from devoid of mortal strife.

Yet his emotion was scarcely a physical fear. It related rather to that deeper dread of the supernatural latent in the cosmos of most of us, though often never in a lifetime being stirred to the surface through lack of aught to inspire it. It was akin to the prickling horror of the stout-hearted Canadian habitat, for whom a panther might possess no terror, but whose spine creeps at the screech of what he deems to be a *loup-garou*.

There was no conscious superstition in the sheriff's composition, but now, in that brief instant, when his eyes met those of Patricia, he felt instinctively as though he had to deal with some creature neither human nor bestial nor yet of supernatural character; hypernatural might better describe the plane to which she seemed to belong, a sort of 'twixt-world entity, a being neither of heaven nor earth nor even hell, but some intermediary substance, mortal of body but soulless and of extravagant outrageous

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faculties from which to draw strength and resource of malignant sort.

And then, as he stood there watching her with a sort of guarded fascination, another emotion rose to sweep aside this first. It was of a kind that might have fired the soul of Ulysses whilst gazing on Circe, fully aware of the power of her spells, for it is doubtful if Patricia had ever been more beautiful in her elfin way than at this moment.

Her silk shirt had been torn away from one shoulder and bosom in her climb, and the dazzling skin, scored by abrasions from which the bright blood trickled, glowed with a sort of incandescence as though from some light within. Her cheeks were slightly flushed; her wide lips, thin but everted, were a carmine streak across her face; and the fineness of her disordered hair refracted the brilliant sun rays, to give her head a nimbus such as one associates not with witches or devils, but holy beings.

Patricia presented at that moment such a volume of baffling contradictions as bad fairies are said to possess, bewildering beauty spread in dazzling abundance over a shell of evil, as a lovely statue of base metal might be plated with gold. The sheriff, himself a sort of inland Ulysses, caught his breath at the sheer wonder of her and, simple natured as he was, found it incredible that a creature of such transcendent

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enchantment could be actually and innately vile; so his first thrill almost of horror was dissolved in a daze of admiration, and Patricia, sensing this, may have felt the advantage to be gained in profiting by his amazement in her lure. She drew closer to him, and her wide mouth flickered up with that singular smile already welded in his dreams.

She moved closer, not seeming to walk, but rather to glide, and she raised her hands just as she had done to Chris. But whereas to Chris her voice and manner and expression had been charged with a mockery that was almost a sneer, she now presented to the sheriff an air of prideful dignity that was not without a trace of appeal.

"You may arrest me if you like," said she. "You are the only person in the world to whom I would surrender. I could not stand it from this fool." She gave a backward gesture of her head toward the form of the unconscious Chris. "But I am not guilty of any wrong. Neither is Léontine. Those two men made us their dupes. But if you want to arrest me"—she glided closer still, and her eyes seemed to pour their melted amber into the fascinated ones of the sheriff—"then you may do so."

It is doubtful if Patricia felt at that moment the least uncertainty as to what must happen next. She knew, of course, that the sheriff was

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a powerful man; none could help but realize this from his breadth of shoulder, depth of chest, and heavy muscles, which seemed flung, as it were, upon his big-boned frame. But Patricia, past mistress of the Japanese and Danish schools of offensive-defensive unarmed combat, backed by a profound knowledge of the weak spots to be found in the strongest human anatomy, knew that the more heavy and powerful the man the slower is apt to be his muscular innervation.

Though her own actual strength was unusual, it was no more superhuman than that of the average woman gymnast in a circus. It was science and swiftness on which she counted far more than weight and strength. As an extreme illustration of the advantage to be found therein, let one imagine how much chance an athlete whose movements are projected by the ultrarapid camera would have against one depicted at normal speed.

Even the sight of the unconscious Chris might not have warned the sheriff in his englamoured state, nor the fact that he had seen her throw his bull upon its back, and been subjected to similar humiliation himself. It was her plea of innocence that roused him from his semitrance and put his muscles in a state of tension. If Patricia had known of what the Chinaman had told her host her tactics would have been far different. Perhaps she saw the change in his

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eyes and read a fatal error in her insidious attack.

At any rate she struck. It was the same blow that had given Chris his quietus, but it failed. It failed for the simple reason that the discharge of impulse from the sheriff was synchronous with hers. He was not a man to be caught twice napping, and at precisely the same fatal fraction of a second that Patricia had launched her offensive he had done the same, determined to clip her about her lithe body and put her in effectual restraint.

So as Patricia struck, his head was thrust downward and forward and his powerful arms encircled her. The impact of her fist glanced from his jaw harmlessly as a flying *éclat* might glance from a soldier's helmet which it struck at an angle. Patricia, finding herself foiled, writhed about in his grip. Her hands flew to his face for the terrible Japanese eye gouge. The sheriff baffled this by plunging his head beneath her elbow. Patricia, throwing back her arm, caught her own wrist from behind, and as his neck came under her upper arm she attempted the strangle hold, which she applied with all the power of its tremendous leverage. Despite his strength the sheriff could not break it, nor could he long withstand its pressure. But there was one thing he could break, and that was the girl's back.

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He tightened his grip, hooked his great fist over his elbow, which was beneath her shoulder blade, and began to apply the pressure of his fearful vise. He could feel her body swell to meet the strain. With his eyes bulging and his tongue thrust out, he took up, as one might say, another notch. Patricia, fully appreciating her danger, suddenly relaxed completely in the jujutsu fashion, and before he could take up the slack of this yielding she had writhed about so that her hip was jammed against him. But to do this she was forced to abandon her neck hold, when, bending quickly, she seized the sheriff by one knee and, using the great leverage of her position, threw him, heavy as he was, clean over her hip.

The sheriff came down on the bare rock, saving his head by loosing his hold of Patricia. And then he found himself upon his back. Patricia, quick to seize her opportunity, flung herself full length upon him and, seizing the thick hair, which clustered over his ears, in either hand, jerked his head upward to smash it back against the stone.

But it did not go back. The neck of the sheriff was thewed like that of a mustang. Instead, his hands clasped quickly behind her head and drew it down until their cheeks were crushed together with painful force. He might easily have throttled her if he had wished, but

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he did not wish. Instead, he writhed about until they were side by side, when at the cost of a frightful laceration to his elbow he forced his way slowly and inexorably uppermost. And then, vanquished, overcome by the sheer superiority of muscular force against her fulcrums and levers masterly applied, Patricia relaxed utterly and lay quite still, her swimming amber eyes looking up into his burning and bloodshot ones with an expression he was unable to interpret.

For a moment the sheriff stared down at her. Then with a short laugh, and watching her warily, he drew from his pocket a piece of polished chain, still scored and brightened from the fangs of his puma, a padlock, and a single pair of handcuffs.

"There, my beauty," said he, "I've got you now."

He slipped the chain about her unresisting neck, drew it fairly snug, and secured it with the padlock. Through the last link of the other end he passed the shackle of the handcuff, then snapped its mate shut on his own broad wrist. This done, he rose to his feet, and stood for a moment staring down with an inscrutable expression at the limp figure of his captive.

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Chapter XVII

THE blow with which Patricia had put Chris *hors de combat*, though sharp, was not heavy, so that the resulting concussion was of short duration. He regained his senses suddenly and in their full possession, as is apt to be the case where there is no crushing force applied. It was, in fact, precisely the method by which the plainsman of two generations ago might capture a wild stallion that defied his lasso were he a sufficiently good shot. It was known as creasing, and was effected by glancing a rifle bullet from the horse's head, which it must strike fully enough to stun by its concussion. Many splendid horses have been killed by the bullet striking the fraction of an inch too low.

Chris awoke in no degree the worse for his brief nap. He sat up suddenly, to look with amazement at the struggle between Patricia and the sheriff. Chris might even have lent a hand in the subjugation of the girl, but it never occurred to him to do so. For one thing, it would have struck him as absurdly foolish, first to have been knocked out himself and then to go to the assistance of so powerful a man in

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his struggle with a mere lissom girl; and for another he felt that the sheriff would have resented such interference, in which sentiment he was entirely correct.

Chris had revived at that stage of the bizarre encounter where the two were lying on the naked rock side by side, face to face, with the sheriff slowly extricating himself from Patricia's serpentine embrace.

He now watched the sheriff's subsequent tactics with mingled emotions of satisfaction and disapproval. It seemed to him that a man of his uncommon strength should have been enabled to subdue the most fractious of young women without any such outrageously rough treatment. He would have thought that all the situation required might have been achieved by the sheriff's merely seizing her by the wrists. Then he remembered what had happened to himself, and smiled a little sheepishly. He knew the sheriff for a man of kindly nature despite a certain grimness of purpose.

But as Chris watched the sheriff pass the end of the glittering steel chain round the girl's neck, secure it with a padlock, then attach the other end of the seven-foot length by a pair of handcuffs to his own wrist, he felt moved to protest. Criminal the girl might be, thief and accessory before and after the fact to a murder, but after all she was a woman, and there seemed some-

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thing terrible and degrading in this last act of his friend. He scrambled to his feet.

"Oh, come, Bob," said he. "She may be a bad lot and a holy terror in a scrap, but you really oughtn't to chain her by the neck like a wild beast."

The sheriff turned to him a pair of bloodshot eyes set in a face that was still turgid from congestion of Patricia's strangle hold.

"She is a wild beast, boy," said he, "but I've tamed others, and I calculate to tame her, too."

Patricia lay motionless. But her pale, tawny eyes were fixed on her captor with an unfathomable expression.

"I'm taking no chances with her," muttered the sheriff. "That chain won't gall her pretty neck as much as a noose of hemp a little later on."

His words produced a startling effect upon Patricia. She sprang to her feet, and stood for a moment, a wild and distraught figure. Her abundant hair was tumbling about her bare shoulders, the silk riding shirt had been ripped and rent in tatters so that she was practically nude to the waist, the gleaming skin scratched and abraded, and her round knees in their snug-fitting gaiters were trembling.

"What?" she cried, in a strangling voice. "Did Townley kill her?"

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The color returning slowly to Chris's face faded, to leave it a ghastly pallor.

"Townley?" he cried. "Was that man Howard Townley?"

Patricia bowed her head, then folded her arms across her bosom, her fingers clutching at her bare shoulders.

Chris walked to where she stood, and seized her by the arm.

"So it was Townley," said he, and turned to the sheriff. "It was the man who had sworn revenge on Nita Heming because she led him to betray himself as the most fiendish, coldest-blooded murderer of this day and age. He slipped through the jaws of the trap and must have got over here to join this gang"—he gave Patricia another little shake, not roughly, but with a sort of suppressed and concentrated fury of despair—"and this woman helped him manage it. And for what? For greed. Here's her wage. Here's the price of Nita's life."

Gripping Patricia by her bare arm, he thrust his other hand into the bulging pocket of her riding breeches and drew out a fistful of glittering jewels, which he handed to the sheriff. The other pocket disgorged the rope of pearls.

"I've been a fool. I thought only of the robbery, and that he had tried to choke Nita into silence. But it was cold-blooded murder. I'm sorry now I killed the foul beast."

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Patricia raised her head. "You killed him?" she asked, in a choking voice.

"Killed him?" Chris snarled, between his teeth. "If he'd had nine lives they'd have been let out of him before I'd finished with his filthy carcass. It's your turn now, my girl."

Patricia seemed to shrink within herself. She did not fall, but there was a curious indrawing of her entire vigorous physique. One would have said that she had been subjected to a sudden desiccation or a sort of deflation which had abstracted a volume of not only physical but spiritual essence. She seemed to deliquesce, to melt away before the astonished eyes of the two men, to suffer loss of stature and dimensions, so that whereas a few moments before she had been a creature of force and size and vigor she became at once, as if through some enchantment or exorcism, a shrinking, trembling, and terrified girl. And as though in dread of the devastating wrath now pouring from Chris in withering blasts, she shrank against the sheriff, her captor, in the cowering way of a frightened dog against the knees of its master.

To Chris there was nothing strange in this. He saw in her merely a terrified evildoer taken red-handed, and cowering under the promise of retribution while still seeking protection of the law. But the sheriff saw it differently. To him she was the puma again, a creature dan-

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gerous, murderous, ferocious, but without tenacity of courage. In the revulsion of his sentiment he pitied her, and, as if feeling this emotion, Patricia cast up at him a wild, beseeching look, then lowered her tawny eyes again. The sheriff dropped his big hand on her disheveled head, then looked at Chris.

"Come," said he, shortly, "let's go."

They made their way along the shelf and came presently to a deep, eroded fissure, a sort of gully, through which they clambered down to the level of the road. The sheriff led the way; behind him Patricia followed at the length of her chain, like a savage animal subdued. Chris came last, steadily enough, but in an abstracted way, like a somnambulist.

Striking the highway, they walked back to where they had left the car. The sheriff beckoned with his head to the foot of the cliffs, then, as if seized with a sudden thought, he drew a key from his pocket, unlocked the shackle on his wrist, and attached it to an awning brace of the car.

"Get in!" said he, sternly, to Patricia. "Put on your coat."

Patricia obeyed in silence.

"Come with me, son," said the sheriff to Chris, and led the way to where the body of Stephan lay sprawled across the flat rock. Chris, standing aloof and buried in his thoughts,

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watched the sheriff drag the inanimate clay to the edge of a deep crevice a few paces away.

"What's this?" growled the sheriff, and lowered himself until out of sight.

An instant later his head and shoulders reappeared, and he flung a valise out upon the broken rocks. Chris, rousing himself, leaned down and opened it, then gave an inarticulate sound that might have been a laugh or snarl.

"The final link," said he. "Her nurse's dress."

"Put it in the car," said the sheriff.

Chris obeyed in silence. The sheriff tumbled the body of Stephan into the crevice and began to cover it with broken stones. He was so long in doing this that Chris returned to the spot.

"What's the game, Bob?"

The sheriff straightened up and stared at him.

"I'm going to ask for something, Chris. It may come hard, but I want you to do it for me."

"Shoot."

"I want you to get in your plane and fly back home. Then if Miss Heming pulls through I want you not to breathe a word of what's happened."

Chris reflected somberly on this request.

"And if she doesn't?"

"Then the law can have this girl."

Chris shot him a quick, curious look.

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"What do you want of her, Bob?"

The sheriff's eyes met his squarely. "I want her, that's all."

"What?"

"That's it. Listen, boy. There's no living human being but what's got a soul somewhere. Maybe I can find hers for her, and maybe I can't. I want to try."

"You'll never find it, Bob. There's none to find."

"Then so much the worse for her and me," said the sheriff, doggedly. "She'll have to help, of course. If she won't—why, then the law can have her."

Chris shrugged. "All right," he answered, shortly.

"You'll keep it to yourself—all this morning's work?"

"Sure. But if Nita's dead when I get back—" His face contracted with a spasm that might have been grief or rage, or both.

"I've got a hunch she won't be, Chris. I've seen men lynched brought round, and she's a strong girl. Come on, let's get out of this before somebody comes along."

Chris glanced up at the sides of the gorge. "I can't jump off here, Bob. You'll have to tow me down to where it's open."

"All right," said the sheriff; "let's get going."

They went back and stepped into the car.

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Unmindful of Patricia cowering in her corner, the sheriff started the motor, drove down to the plane, then turned. Chris attached it close behind the car, then stepped into it. Driving slowly, they soon reached the mouth of the gorge and came out into more open country where the road led down in a straight and gradual descent.

"All right!" said Chris. "I can get away here."

The sheriff stopped, got out, and a few moments later the airplane soared away. For a moment or two the sheriff stood watching its departure; then he stepped to the back of the car. Patricia raised her head and stared at him questioningly.

"What are you going to do with me?" she muttered.

"That's up to you, my girl."

"What do you mean?"

"Listen here. They're not going to hang you, like Chris said; but the least you can expect is a long term."

A shudder rippled through Patricia. "I'd rather be hanged."

The sheriff studied her for a moment in silence. "Was Léontine in this?" he asked.

"No. She knew nothing about it."

"Why do you say that?"

"Because it's true. Léontine would not have

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trusted Townley near that girl. She knew that he would kill her."

"Did you know that?" His blue eyes fastened on hers with a compelling force.

Patricia nodded, and at the motion the chain clinked. She began to tremble. The sheriff studied her for a moment in silence.

"Why do you want to save Léontine?" he asked.

"Why shouldn't I? Léontine is not guilty—and she is my friend."

There came the faintest suggestion of softening in the grim face of the sheriff. "Have you ever been in jail?" he asked.

Patricia shook her head, and the chain jingled. She shuddered again, and dropped her face in her hands. Then she raised it suddenly and looked at the sheriff with a curious glow in her pale eyes.

"I'm—I'm like your puma," she whispered.

"Yes," said the sheriff, softly, "you're like my puma, only you're a human, and the puma could never be anything but a brute beast. How would you like to keep on being my puma?"

"I don't understand."

The sheriff rested his elbows on the side of the car. "I mean just that," said he. "I told you a minute ago that it was up to you. Would you rather be my puma down there on the

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ranch or be locked up in a cage in the state penitentiary?"

Patricia did not answer.

"I can offer you a better choice than that," said the sheriff, slowly. "As I just told Chris, I believe every human being has a soul."

Patricia nodded.

"I meant it," said the sheriff. "That's my bet, and I'm willing to play it to the limit. I want to help you find yours. I don't mean for you to be my puma—a pet or slave or anything kept on a chain. Listen to me, girl. You know what you said about the ranch that day we were on the top of the butte? You thought it was terrible. How would it look to you now? Because if you agree to what I'm going to offer, it's got to be the ranch for yours. Maybe for years to come. It's there you'll have to find your soul."

"How?" murmured Patricia.

"As my wife," said the sheriff.

Patricia's eyes flashed him a wild look. "Your wife? You would want me for your wife?"

The sheriff nodded. "I told you I'd play my bet to the limit—my dutiful and obedient wife."

"But why?"

"Because I want to give you every chance."

"Is that all?"

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"No. I've wanted you from the moment I first laid eyes on you. But I don't aim to drag you any deeper."

He turned abruptly, and got up behind the wheel, then started the motor. The car moved forward and began to roll down the declivity. They had gone perhaps three miles before the sheriff turned in his seat and looked back at Patricia.

"You can have until we get to Denver to make up your mind," said he.

Mile after mile fled past. The sheriff drove fast, the road was good, and they were now descending instead of mounting.

Then at length there came in sight far in the distance the broken outlines of the Mile High City. The sheriff did not stir. He heard the clinking of the chain, and something brushed against the crisp, curling hair, above his ear.

"I—I surrender. I agree," It was the faintest of whispers.

The sheriff slowed and stopped the car. He turned in his seat. Patricia had shrunk back in the corner.

"Lean forward," said the sheriff.

Patricia obeyed. The sheriff unfastened the padlock, released the chain, took the handcuff from his wrist, then looked for a moment at Patricia with a grim smile; but there were deep fires in his dark-blue eyes.

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"Do up your hair," said he. "Put on a veil if you've got one. You're no longer a puma."

"But Chris?"

"You've nothing to fear from Chris if you play the game. Otherwise God help you."

"I'll—I'll play the game!" whispered Patricia.

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Chapter XVIII

AS the plane mounted rapidly the rush of air roused Chris from the lethargy that for several moments had come close to overpowering him. If the sheriff had paused to reflect he would scarcely have permitted the younger man to attempt his homeward flight. There are limits to all human endurance, as the sheriff well knew from personal experience, and the briefest consideration must have shown him that the divers strains of mind and body to which his friend had been subjected in the last twelve hours were enough to have overpowered the strongest of men. Chris had danced the best part of the night, fought for the life of the woman he loved and feared had been murdered, guided his airplane for hours, effected a precarious landing, after which had been a foot race, the killing of a criminal, and the scaling of a cliff, followed by his being knocked senseless from a blow upon the jaw. The wildest of melodrama could scarcely have plunged a man into a more violent stress both mental and physical, and the sheriff, had he stopped to think, might

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reasonably have feared a fatal collapse with the plane rushing through the high, thin air.

But what most supported Chris in the final lap was the tone of conviction in the sheriff's voice when he had stated his belief that Nita would recover. There is no such stimulant as hope, and it was now this hope which rallied Chris and made the speed of his swift plane seem like the heavy flight of a pelican as he raced back to the airdrome.

The distance, too, was accomplished in something less than an hour, and as he took the ground and came to a stop he felt himself to be well in hand. Disengaging himself, he struck across for the Hemings' bungalow, in front of which the two cars were still standing.

Chris rushed up the steps, and as he entered the house he came upon the two doctors who had been in attendance when he left. These looked at his haggard face with quick professional concern.

"How is she?" burst from Chris.

"Out of all danger. She came to just after you left and has had a little nap. She's been asking for you. Her brother's all right, too."

"Can I see her?"

"Oh yes—for a minute or two. Wait a second. I guess you need a little looking after, yourself."

But Chris was oblivious of this advice. He

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ran up the stairs, and as he entered Nita's room a white-clad nurse rose from where she was sitting at the head of the bed, and gave him a startled look, then stepped aside.

Nita was resting quietly, with her face to the wall and one bare arm thrown over her bright hair. Hearing Chris, she turned, and as her eyes met his she smiled.

Chris flung himself upon his knees at the side of the bed.

"Nita!" he cried, in a strangled voice, and began to sob.

Nita's arms went round his neck. She drew his face against hers. "Chris—darling—" she began to soothe and comfort him.

The nurse went softly out. She was an experienced woman and knew that this particular sort of emotion was in certain cases more curative than dangerous. But a few moments later Nita summoned her.

"Nurse!"

"Yes, Miss Heming." The nurse glanced down at Chris with an expression of dismay. "He's fainted?"

Nita smiled. "No," she answered, "he's only fallen asleep."

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Chapter XIX

LÉONTINE was putting the finishing touches to her simple but effective toilet when her room telephone rang, and she was informed that Mr. Hartwell was waiting below.

Glancing at her wrist watch, Léontine saw that he was precisely on the minute for their luncheon engagement. It had not been a surprise to her when the sheriff had asked the night before for an interview. Léontine was as skilled in reading the symptoms of a violent infatuation as any doctor of the Mile High City in reading those of the disease for which it is a Mecca. She had not missed the surveillance of their late host during the course of the ball, though she had been deluded in its motive. A man of his age and force and wealth, who had lived the best years of his life womanless in the desert places, would not prove a person to be lightly shaken off, Léontine reasoned, and she wondered what she could possibly say to convince him that his passion was a hopeless one.

The first glance at his face convinced Léontine that his case was even more serious than she had supposed. It showed lines and furrows that had not been noticeable at the ranch, while

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his eyes were slightly bloodshot, as if from lack of sleep. Also, his expression was more grim, the squareness of his jaw more noticeable, and his manner held a suggestion of constraint which Léontine ascribed to a not unnatural nervous embarrassment. But, on the whole, he was not only most presentable, but with a certain air of distinction; well groomed, immaculate, dressed in a becoming suit of dark-blue serge that was evidently the handiwork of the city's leading tailor, and he carried himself with the military bearing of a soldier in mufti.

It was the luncheon hour, and the sheriff suggested that they go in immediately to the table he had reserved. This proved to be in a sheltered corner, protected by a column from the enfilading fire of curious eyes. They were served at once, and the sheriff opened the conversation casually by asking after Patricia's health.

"She must be quite well," said Léontine, "because she and Stephan left early this morning. She did not come in to wish me *au revoir*. I am to follow to-night by train with our luggage, as Stephan wished the car as light as possible for climbing over the pass."

She wondered a little at the intentness of the sheriff's eyes at being thus told something that he already knew, but ascribed it to his emotion at learning that Patricia had left.

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"Is Sir Harold still in Salt Lake City?" the sheriff asked.

"I suppose so. We were to meet him there."

"He was not there at three o'clock this morning," said the sheriff, quietly.

His statement told him what he most desired to know. Despite the comparative isolation of his life, the sheriff was a skilled reader of facial expression, a partly natural gift. If now Léontine had shown in her mobile face the symptoms of fear alone, the sheriff's doubts of her might never have been removed. But thus taken unawares, it indicated first intense surprise, which look was instantly followed by one of dread. She leaned forward, her mat complexion even a shade paler than was habitual.

"Yes," answered the sheriff. "I saw him. As close as I am to you."

"Where?" Léontine's voice was scarcely more than a whisper.

"At Miss Heming's bungalow."

Léontine drew in her breath with a sudden dilatation of her delicately chiseled nostrils.

"What was he doing there?"

"He was not doing anything. He was dead."

Léontine seemed slowly to freeze. Her eyes stared at the sheriff with a sick, a stricken look. But the sheriff, watching her keenly, could detect no sign of terror, no slightest flicker of apprehension.

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Then moistening her lips, she said, "Are you trying to trap me into saying something?"

"No," the sheriff answered. "I have already found out most of what I wanted to know. You might as well ask the question."

"Very well," said Léontine, quietly. "And Miss Heming?"

"She is out of danger," said the sheriff; and added, casually, "But her jewels are gone."

Once more this simple, yet crafty man, whose guile was that of the mountains and plains and lessons learned from their savage habitants of men and beasts, received the information he desired, for the beautiful Slavic features opposite him proclaimed the shocked astonishment of the brain behind them, then instantly assumed a look of anger. There was no mistake in the genuineness of this. Any person might exhibit the facial traits of anger at will, but to control the vasomotor centers is a different matter, and the crimson signals of a passionate wrath were now flying in Léontine's clear skin. The pupils of her eyes also dilated.

"Whom do you suspect?" she asked.

"Not you," said the sheriff. "It's plain enough, even to a stupid fellow like me, that this is a surprise to you."

Léontine bowed her head. "It is," said she.

"What did you know about the scheme?" asked the sheriff.

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"Nothing."

"Think again. I know all about you, Léontine. More than that, I know that you voted down Patricia's plan to shoot me up on the road from the ranch here and get the diamonds. I know all about the late Howard Townley, alias Sir Harold Trimble."

Léontine raised her small, slender hands to her temples.

"Think again," repeated the sheriff. "What did you know about this plan?"

Léontine let fall her hands and, leaning forward, looked him steadily in the eyes.

"I only know," said she, "that the stealing of Miss Heming's jewels was suggested. I vetoed it absolutely, because I did not dare trust Townley within reach of her."

"Why not?"

"Because I knew his hatred of her and his thirst for vengeance. I knew the character of the man."

The sheriff nodded. "I believe you," he answered. "Patricia told me the same thing."

"And Stephan?"

"Stephan is dead. Chris Carmichael shot him through the head this morning on the side of the road."

Léontine drew in her breath shudderingly; then, "Where is Patricia?"

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"Patricia is resting in a hotel not far from here."

"In a hotel?"

"Yes. A hotel, not a jail."

"But is she not under arrest?"

"No."

Léontine looked bewildered. "I do not understand," said she, faintly. "What do you intend to do with her?"

"Marry her."

Years of criminal experience in the capitals and resorts of Europe, years spent in eluding the most astute detectives of the world, years passed in intimate relations with the master criminals of her day, seemed for the moment inadequate training for Léontine's composure at this information. She stared at the sheriff dazedly, then began to tremble. Though inexperienced in the nervous organization of women, it was evident to the sheriff that some hysteric outburst was not far removed, and must be instantly controlled.

"Listen!" said he, sharply. "Now that I'm convinced that you're innocent, I'll tell you all about it."

Léontine with a tremendous effort got herself in hand, when the sheriff in his straightforward way described to her all that had occurred. And as Léontine listened her emotion gave way to wonder and a sort of awe. Her nature,

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responsive to extremities of passion, could appreciate far better than the sheriff's the psychological reactions which he described merely by the empirical results. At least she understood those of the sheriff. Of Patricia's she could not yet be sure. This strange organization had always baffled any solution even by so subtle a brain as that of hers.

"So that is how we stand," the sheriff concluded. "Outside of Chris and you and myself nobody knows about this robbery. Chris will keep his mouth shut for my sake, and you will do the same for Patricia and yourself. All that is known amounts to this—that a man pretending to be a doctor, and a nurse who might really have been a nurse, went to Miss Heming's bungalow, where the man tried to kill her, but was killed himself by Chris. Miss Heming and her brother need never know about the robbery. The jewels are supposed to have been found by Chris and given to me to put in safe deposit. I have put them in safe deposit. As the case stands it is up to Patricia. If she sticks to her bargain, all right and good. If she does not, then she goes to jail—and so may some of the rest of us," he added, dryly.

Léontine drew a deep breath. She stared at the sheriff in a mixture of fear and admiration.

"I thought we Slavs were a wild race," said

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she, "but it seems there are others. May I see Patricia?"

The sheriff shook his head. "Not yet," he answered. "When a man starts in to train a wild animal he's got to keep everybody else away from the cage. I'll let you know when you can see her. It may be sooner or later. It all depends."

"On what?"

"On Patricia. If she's got a soul I'll drag it out of her. If it's a crooked one"—his eyes blazed at her across the table—"by Heaven! I'll bend it straight!"

"And if she has none?"

"Then," said the sheriff, slowly, "I'll weld into her a piece of mine."

He called the waiter and paid the bill. They left the dining room, a focus for many curious eyes. But to these there was no hint of the terrific interview that had been so quietly conducted in that public place. The clients of the hotel saw merely a very beautiful woman of foreign type, and a strong and handsome man whom many recognized with a friendly look as Sheriff Bob.

Outside the dining room the sheriff paused. "I'll send round for Patricia's baggage. I'll get the license, and we are going to be married to-morrow, and start straight back for the ranch. Your car is in the garage. You'd better

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sell it. Now what do you think of doing, yourself?"

Léontine sighed. "The last of my wicked world has flown to pieces over my head," said she. "I shall never go back to it again. What I do is of no importance to anybody, scarcely to myself. Do you know, dear friend—for you have proved to be such, despite yourself—I could find it in my heart to envy Patricia?"

"Think of that terrible country, countess!"

Léontine shook her head. "No," she answered. "I can think only of the man."

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Chapter XX

INDIAN summer was resting on the Mile High City, "frosty but kindly," the period of pause in an aged year, which, after the turmoil of its life, seemed now desirous to make its peace with the world before departure.

The sunlight was almost mellow, less glittering than golden, and not the faintest draught of air swept across the plateau. The nights left frozen ruts and crisp patches of white, brittle ice in the damp spots, but to one walking about in the dry air it seemed impossible that this could actually be ice, for there was no corresponding chill.

Chris, in the hangar, was going about some final duties with a song on his lips. His work there was practically over, and there were momentous things not very far ahead. His engagement to Nita had been announced, and Mrs. de Forest was giving them an elaborate dinner very shortly. Heming, none the worse for his misadventure, was steadily improving, and he had given Chris a straight talk in regard to Nita.

"Nita needs marrying a whole lot," said

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Heming, in his brusque way. "She's as crazy about you as you are about her, and there's no reason under heaven why you shouldn't get married right off. The doctors here give you a clean bill of health. You saved her life, and you've removed the danger that's been hanging over her, and the mere fact of your being poor has about as much importance as if you couldn't tell red from green. Nita needs a lot of looking after, and I'm not quite the man for the job—no brother ever is. Besides, I might want to get married myself if I keep on gaining as I have been for the last six months."

He looked at Chris and gave a prodigious wink. Chris laughed.

"I get you, Jerry," said he. "That big, beautiful nurse is going to get a life position. What?"

"She's going to be offered one," said Heming, dryly. "My sporting days are over. I propose to settle in this country. I've had my fill of Europe."

Wherefore one may understand the blithe snatches of song which burst from the lips of Chris as he pottered about the hangar getting a plane in readiness for a flight in case some autumnal tourist should desire to view the Mile High City from about a mile higher. He loved an airplane as some men love horses or boats or cars. They seemed to be the vehicles for

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the conduct of which nature had fashioned him. The born airman is such by some peculiar heritage, as though he had grown wings which the high gods have denied mankind and for the lack of which many of us seem strangely incomplete.

Thus occupied, he heard presently a car approaching, and, glancing out, saw with no particular interest a taxi which had drawn up in the mellow blaze outside the hangar. A machinist came in wearing a grin.

"Say, Chris," said he, with the friendly familiarity of the region, "there's a queen out here in a gas buggy wants to take a spin for the afternoon."

"All right," said Chris. "Can do!"

He went out bareheaded and in his overalls. A woman in a hired limousine leaned forward and raised her veil, and Chris saw, to his astonishment, that it was Léontine.

For the moment it flashed across his mind that she was in some difficulty, seeking, perhaps, an avenue of escape, and his face hardened. He had kept his pact with the sheriff and breathed no word of the robbery or the pursuit of Stephan and Patricia. As for the sheriff's course, this had seemed to Chris like the one act of insanity sometimes committed in the life of an otherwise well-balanced man. He could not understand an infatuation directed toward

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Patricia, because he belonged to the class whom this strange personality repelled rather than attracted. Chris could see in Patricia only the monster, craftily cloaked in beauty, but this of a sort which struck him with a horror.

So now, finding himself face to face with Léontine, who he thought had left the city, he froze, just as he might have done two years earlier when, sent to Switzerland for his lungs, he had icily congealed at finding himself in the proximity of some distinguished enemy to the world's peace.

Léontine observed his expression. "You need not look at me like that, monsieur," said she. "I had nothing whatever to do with this terrible affair."

"If I thought for a moment that you had, madam," Chris answered, "I should not look at you at all. How can I serve you?"

"I want to say good-by to Patricia," Léontine answered. "I want you to take me there in your airplane. It is not very far."

"Can that do either of you any good?" Chris asked.

"It is not a question of that," Léontine answered—"or at least not for my part. But even the worst of us have our affections, monsieur, and I cannot leave this place without saying a few words to her. Besides, I desire intensely to know if there is any hope for her

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future happiness or reclamation. Mr. Hartwell told me that I was not to write or try to see her for at least a fortnight, and that period of time elapses at noon to-day. I do not wish to strain his kindness or the sense of hospitality which seems to be a first law of this Western country. If I were to go there in a car it might be trying for us all. But if you will take me in your airplane we need only remain for a few minutes before returning here; and to-night I shall leave Denver for the Pacific coast."

Chris reflected for an instant. There was no person in the world whom he less desired to see than Patricia, and he was not at all sure how the sheriff would feel about his taking Léontine to the ranch, if only for a quarter of an hour's visit. Then he glanced at Léontine's pale face and saw it differently. There was no question but that she had suffered, and, after all, she had done her best to keep her fatal coterie from any criminal act. As for the sheriff, it occurred to Chris that if he had not desired Patricia to see Léontine again he would have said so and would have forbidden absolutely Léontine's going to the ranch at all.

Chris had not heard one word from the sheriff since they had parted in the gorge; in fact, he had put him and Patricia from his mind, or tried to do so. But now, in his moment of brief reflection, it struck him that this in itself was

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scarcely worthy of a stanch friend. He could not see that it would do any great harm to comply with Léontine's request. If the outrageous procedure of the sheriff had resulted ill —and Chris did not see how it could possibly prove otherwise—it would be a friendly act to offer his sympathy, if only in the grip of a hand and the assurance of good will. But if, on the contrary, the man's bizarre conviction that he might yet achieve the redemption of the girl, his wife, had borne the slightest fruit, such encouragement as Chris might be able to offer could prove of moral benefit.

"Very well," said Chris. "How soon do you wish to go?"

"At once," said Léontine, "if that is possible. We can go and return in three hours' time, can we not?"

"Call it four," said Chris. "The plane is all ready."

He glanced at her long fur coat. "I can give you some gauntlets and a hood."

"You are very kind," murmured Léontine.

Chris opened the door and helped her down, then told the machinist to wheel out the plane. He went back into the hangar and got into his flying clothes, bringing out for Léontine such accessories as were necessary to protect her from the rush of air, then saw that she was comfortably placed, and took his

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seat. The machinist turned the fan, and they were off.

A mile high, and his course laid in a bee line with the railroad far beneath to serve as a guide, they drifted eastward, and in what seemed an astonishingly short lapse of time picked up the buildings of the ranch far ahead and below. Planing downward, with their shadow racing them beneath and a little to the north, Chris made a gentle landing not far from the house. But before he had done so his experienced eye had discovered two tiny moving objects; like insects, they were, approaching as if to intercept them.

He helped Léontine to alight, relieved her of hood and goggles and gauntlets, then turned, to see two equestrians riding toward them across the big field of a thousand acres.

"Here they come," said Chris.

Aside from the two riders the place had an air of absolute abandonment. Not even the Chinaman was there, for the sheriff had rewarded his vigilance and paid his passage back to Indo-China, whence he had come. There seemed to be nothing but the buildings and the prairie and a little herd of cattle drowsing against an oblong pyramid of forage, and the two lonely riders who had materialized from the enormous dimensions of the place.

Chris, as he watched their approach, was for

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the first time conscious of a consuming curiosity. There was nothing in all his past experience to compare with such an amazing situation. He felt almost confused, though not embarrassed any more than it might have embarrassed him to be confronted suddenly with some situation that had no bearing upon his life and world. His eyes rested on the two riders a good deal as the traveler in some outlandish place might examine a pair of its denizens, beings aloof from his own scheme of things and to be encountered with that formal courtesy which a person of dignity extends politely to any stranger.

He noticed then that the sheriff was riding a powerful pinto horse, which loped rapidly and with sweeping gait to keep abreast or a little ahead of a pacing sorrel ridden by Patricia. As they swept up to where the airplane had stopped, Chris observed also that Patricia was wearing the same riding costume in which he had seen her last, while the sheriff struck him as rather smarter in appearance, clad more as a sportsman than a rancher, spurred and booted, yet with that air of negligée from which a Westerner dislikes to depart.

They reined shortly, and dismounted, leaving the horses to find their way to the corral. The face of the sheriff as he approached showed no expression of surprise, though lighting with that look of pleasure impossible to disassociate with

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the courtesy of host. Glancing from him to Patricia, Chris could see no change in her. The wide smile whipped up with the curious lifting of her left eyebrow as she gave him a glance before greeting Léontine.

Chris walked to meet his friend. "Hello, Bob!" said he as their hands clasped. "The countess wanted to say good-by to Mrs. Hartwell, so I flew her over."

"Thanks, Chris," said the sheriff, simply, and turned to greet Léontine precisely as he might have done upon her first visit. "Let's go into the house."

Léontine and Patricia preceded them. Chris lingered for a moment to secure his airplane. "We've got to be getting right back, Bob," said he. "The countess is leaving for the coast to-night." He looked anxiously at his friend. "Hope you don't mind my bringing her."

The sheriff smiled and laid his hand on Chris's shoulder.

"I'd have been awful sore if you'd refused, boy," said he. "They tell me you're open to congratulations."

"Why, yes, Bob," said Chris, a little awkwardly.

The sheriff gripped him by the hand, and Chris was struck by the peculiar radiance of his face.

"You're a wonder, Bob," said he.

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"No." The sheriff shook his head and stood for a moment as if in thought. "I just played my bet; and let me tell you, son, it's going to be a safe one."

"But all of this," said Chris. "The place, the life. I don't seem to be able to get it through my head. Are you sure, Bob?"

The sheriff nodded. "Yes," he answered; "but then, I was sure from the very start."

The mystification deepened on Chris's face. "But why, Bob? How could you be sure? What did you have to go on?"

"Well, now, son, it's sort of hard to tell you. But I would explain it something like this: You see, there are good people and there are bad people and there are all the others in between. But I couldn't believe that there was any living human who was pure bad straight through. Now if such a person did happen, I reasoned that there must be some flaw in the mental machine."

"Insanity?"

"Yes, in that one respect. A paralysis of moral sense which must leave that person irresponsible. Or if it wasn't that, then it had to be the possession of a devil. You can choose between the two."

Chris nodded. "I think I see what you mean," he muttered.

The sheriff's blue eyes kindled. "That's how

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I sized up Patricia," said he. "She was too bad for a normal human being, but her badness was only of one sort; or call it two sorts—theft and no consideration for human life. Of course that's quite enough, but otherwise I doubted there was any wrong in her. It was plain she was without the weakness of her sex. For all the bad company of thieves and murderers she'd lived in, Patricia had kept herself as clean as a snow peak. She'd never loved a man or listened to a man; and that, too, showed she wasn't normal, that there was something lacking or undeveloped or crowded out."

Chris nodded. "I get you, Bob. This devil in her was a jealous brute."

"You said it, Chris. She was bedeviled. I've seen it in red Indians, and a Jesuit priest I once knew told me he'd seen it often up in Tibet. He was an honest man and a good man, and he told me that he'd exorcised these devils, cast them out like it tells Christ did, in the Bible."

The sheriff paused, and his eyes went hungrily toward Patricia, standing by the door with Léontine.

"I got it in my head, Chris, that here was Patricia's trouble, and the more I thought of it the more I grew convinced that I was right. Then she showed some hopeful signs. She had courage, and played the game to the limit, and

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when we'd trapped her and I had her on the chain, she stood by Léontine. And there was something else."

He stopped abruptly, and a swarthy color swept over his face.

"What was that, Bob?" Chris asked, gently.

"Well, I'd felt for some time that this devil in her might be exorcised if only I knew the spell. I'm not a holy man, but I've tried to be a good one, and I knew my will was strong. I felt that for one thing she'd have to get some tremendous sort of jolt, something that might nigh kill her, if it didn't kill her outright; and that morning in the gorge when I nearly broke her back and then threw her down on the rocks and liked to crush the life out of her, there was something in her eyes as she lay there looking up at me which told me that I was master then, and not the devil in her. I knew that second that I'd driven him out."

Chris stared at him, astonished. "And then you chained her by the neck?" he gasped.

The sheriff nodded. "Yes, I chained her like my puma—with the same chain. It came hard, but something warned me that I'd better do it—to keep that devil out. There was more in the chain than mere security, my son. It was a sort of symbol. It said that I was master and she the captive. She's worn one ever since —a gold one, with a cross on it."

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Chris stared at him with a sort of awe. He tried to smile. "You're some tamer, Bob."

Again the wave of crimson color swept across the man's strong face.

"She did her part. She played the game. She stuck to her bargain. And now I know that she is safe."

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Chapter XXI

THERE were tears in Léontine's eyes as she stood in the doorway making her last farewell with Patricia.

"I don't understand, my dear," said she, "but then, there are a great many things I shall never be able to understand. What has happened to you?"

"I don't know," Patricia answered. "Something has gone away—and something very wonderful has come to take its place."

"But this ranch—these terrible solitudes?"

"I've lived in worse ones all these years," said Patricia, "but they were different. They were solitudes of soul."

"Soul, Patricia?"

Patricia nodded.

"But the emptiness, the monotony? Doesn't it appall you to think of the years stretching out ahead—like these never-ending telegraph poles beside the railroad track—marching on and on and on?"

Patricia's smile whipped up for an instant. "They get somewhere finally," she said.

"But you say that he has told you that you

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are never to leave this place," Léontine protested, and looked over to where Chris and the sheriff were standing. "It is really prison, my dear, and you know we all agreed that death was better than prison."

"There are all sorts of prisons," Patricia answered, "and sometimes I am not quite sure but that I have been released from mine. I can't quite tell you what I mean, Léontine, but perhaps I might have been my own jailer."

Léontine appeared to reflect. "It is very plain," said she, "that you have fallen in love with your husband."

A sudden flame spread over Patricia's face. "No, I don't think it's that. I never could have fallen in love with any man. I had to be enslaved. When he put that chain round my neck something inside me seemed to break. I ceased to be Patricia. And when he brought me here and I stood, that evening, in the door and I looked out across the prairies and realized that he had doomed me to this exile, something swelled and swelled until it burst and seemed to set me free. I knew then I was no longer my own woman. And do you know, Léontine, it gave me a sense of infinite relief. I was no longer to think for myself, nor act for myself, but just to please the master and do his will."

"Your spirit was broken?" said Léontine.

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Patricia shook her head. "No—set free. 'From hope and fear set free.' You know Swinburne. Well, the lines:

> That even the weariest river
> Winds somewhere safe to sea.

I was terribly weary, Léontine, without knowing it. Here in these boundless prairies I seem to have found my sea and my pilot. Some day, I think, he will take me into a safe port." Her smile flickered again. "Men don't always keep their promises of punishment."

Léontine sighed. Her eyes filled with tears. "If we could only tell the difference between our rewards and punishments, my dear, what a tremendous amount of trouble we should be saved."

Chris turned and gave them a wave of his hand. "All ready, countess," he called.

The two women walked slowly out across the open space. The fifteen-minute visit had drawn itself into an hour and the weather promised a change. A slight breeze had sprung up from the north, and to the southward was a lee set of sullen cloud bank. The sheriff cast his eyes about the wide horizon

"Norther coming," said he. "But you can beat it back and some to spare, Chris. I reckon the summer has kissed us good-by."

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"Well," said Chris, gayly, for his heart had lightened in the last hour and he had learned a deal of men and women and the soul of things, "it was some kiss, Bob."

"Yes." The sheriff glanced at Patricia and his eyes burned as they had the first day they looked at her. "It was some kiss."

Patricia seemed to drift from Léontine's side and to weld herself against the square bulk of her husband. Léontine was suddenly reminded of what this strong-hearted man had said to her at their last meeting—"If she's got no soul of her own I'll weld a piece of mine into her." And then as Chris disposed of her comfortably in her seat Léontine became suddenly conscious of the fact that she was absolutely alone.

For there was no Patricia, no sheriff, no Chris, for Léontine. The first of the two were apart, complete, arriving at some place that Léontine had not yet found. Chris, her pilot, had his mind on the machine, and his heart in a bungalow of Denver. Léontine, only, was the negligible quantity. She, the best of the criminal band, was now the most utterly alone.

And when, presently, the fan thrummed and the plane took the high airs and the shoulders of Chris bulked before her eyes like the controlling genii of her immediate destiny, Léon-

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tine looked back and saw two tiny figures standing against the saffron glare of the ranch house. She caught the flash of Patricia's arm as she waved, and Léontine could not see any more because the gush of tears distorted all her vision, and it occurred to her how silly all wrongdoing was and how amazingly fortunate were those who found it out in time and lived according to the law, and she wondered what was going to become of herself, and almost wished that that cold, blue, steely light would herald in a blast to spin the airplane and relieve her problems as those of the undeserving Patricia had been relieved.

But this was not destined in the case of Léontine. Her punishment was perhaps, of all her coterie, the most severe. The loneliness of the prairie which she had dreaded for Patricia seemed an Elysian field as she stood haggling with Chris and trying vainly to pay her aërial chauffeur his fee.

"Don't let's spoil it by talking money, countess," said Chris. "Let's imagine that I have taken you in my car for a spin to Mars."

Léontine ceased her arguments and allowed him to put her in a jaunty little vehicle, and heard him directing the machinist to take her back to her hotel.

"Good-by," said Chris, and the loneliness of

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interplanetary space descended on Léontine, the least guilty of all.

And this loneliness increased a moment later, for she saw a girl with ruddy hair walking across the field, and she saw Chris meet her and take her hand and walk back with her toward the bungalow.

THE END

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